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**SUBALTERN STUDIES VI**  
**Writings on South Asian History and Society**



# **Subaltern Studies VI**

## **Writings on South Asian History and Society**

**Edited by**  
**RANAJIT GUHA**

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## Preface

The publication of this volume coincides with my retirement from the *Subaltern Studies* editorial team.

I, therefore, take this opportunity to thank our readers whose interest in the series, since its debut in 1982, has been a source of much encouragement to us.

I wish also to record my sense of gratitude to my editorial colleagues for their advice and support; without these it would not have been possible to cope with the responsibilities with which they entrusted me during these years.

The series will continue to be published, as usual, under the editorship of the *Subaltern Studies* collective.

Once again we invite our readers to join us as contributors to the series. Anyone wishing to do so may first contact any member of the editorial team with a specific proposal or with a draft of the proposed article for consideration.

Canberra, November 1988

Ranajit Guha

# Acknowledgement

This volume of *Subaltern Studies* is the product of collective work by a team made up of Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Gautam Bhadra, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, Ranajit Guha, David Hardiman, Gyan Pandey and Sumit Sarkar, all of whom have participated equally in every detail of its planning and editing.

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# The Kalki-Avatar of Bikrampur: A Village Scandal in Early Twentieth Century Bengal\*

SUMIT SARKAR

Browsing through the rich collection of Bengali tracts<sup>\*</sup> in the National Library of Calcutta, I came across an intriguing title: *Kalki-avatarer Mokaddama / Bikrampure Bhishan Vyabhichar!* (Dacca: Chaitra 1311; March–April 1905). This translates as Trial of the Kalki-avatar/Terrible Immoralities in Bikrampur! The pamphlet, published by Madhusudan Chaudhuri on behalf of the weekly *Dacca Prakash*, described through seventy-five pages of extracts from court proceedings the remarkable events in Doyhata village, Munshiganj subdivision, Dacca district, on 23 Agrahayan 1311 (mid December 1904). Lalmohan Majumdar, an upper-caste householder of Doyhata, had invited into his house a poor Brahmin sadhu hailing from a village in the adjoining Madaripur subdivision of Faridpur district.<sup>1</sup> This Kalachand sadhu occasionally claimed to be the Kalki-avatar, the tenth incarnation of Vishnu, with whose coming Koli-yuga would end and the world set right side up again. Two untouchable disciples, the Chandal Prasanna and Ananda Bhuiyani, followed Kalachand into the Majumdar house. Under circumstances for which several different explanations were given later, Prasanna killed Ananda on the afternoon of 23 Agrahayan, in

\*While finalizing this paper, I have benefited greatly from the criticism and comments of Pradip Dutta, Tanika Sarkar, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ranajit Guha. I am grateful also to the colleagues in the *Subaltern Studies* editorial board present at the Delhi Discussion in January 1988.

<sup>1</sup> ‘Majumdar’ is usually a Brahmin or a Kayastha surname; that the Doyhata Majumdars were upper-caste is confirmed by the desecration of the sacred thread of a relative of theirs, Upendrachandra Ghoshal (normally a Brahmin title).

the presence and with the probable complicity of Kalachand and Lalmohan. Somehow Ananda had been identified with Yama, the god of death; with his murder, therefore, the new era had begun. In a mood of apocalyptic frenzy, the Chandal now went around setting fire to neighbouring houses. He had been calling Lalmohan 'Dronacharya', and himself, at times, 'Hanuman'; what he was doing now, he declared, was to burn 'Lanka'. Nudity was a second motif: the women of the Majumdar family were made to strip, touch a (presumably purifying) fire, and then pay obeisance to Kalachand. Rajlakshmi, Lalmohan's wife, had her pubic hair burnt, a *kalki* (pipe for smoking *ganja*) was thrust into her vagina, and Prasanna made her kick her husband three times on the forehead. Some of the men were also insulted and stripped, and one had his sacred thread burnt. All this went on for much of the evening and night. Prasanna was eventually overpowered by some neighbours a little before dawn the next day. At the trial before the Dacca sessions court in March 1905, the Indian jury acquitted Lalmohan and Kalachand, and found Prasanna guilty of culpable homicide, not murder. The British judge disagreed, there was an appeal to the Calcutta high court, and in June 1905 much stiffer sentences were passed against all the three accused.

The pamphlet (henceforward *KM*) contains the depositions of the three accused before the honorary magistrate of Srinagar and the Munshigunj deputy magistrate, the evidence of twenty-two witnesses, and the jury recommendations of the Dacca sessions trial of 9–16 March 1905. I was able to cross-check and get a few additional details from the Calcutta daily *Bengalee*, while the much scantier reporting about Doyhata in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* includes what appears to be the full text of the Calcutta high court judgment of 28 June 1905.<sup>2</sup>

Calcutta reporting of the affair was on the whole cursory and more than a little inhibited: certainly the matter never reached the front-page headlines. I could find no reference at all in the *Report on Native Papers* (the weekly official summary of the Indian press). A local history of Bikrampur published in 1909 had only one brief shocked sentence about the case: 'The scandalous story of the 'Kalki-

<sup>2</sup> *Bengalee*, 14–19 March 1905; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 15 March and 29 June 1905.

'avatar' of Doyhata has ruined the good-reputation of a civilized place like Bikrampur.'<sup>3</sup>

Somehow the incident had failed to attain the status of a scandal: more precisely, it quickly became the kind of 'scandal' that one knows but does not talk about, as distinct from those incessantly recalled and retold, for purposes of reform or titillation.<sup>4</sup> This happened despite the build-up by the *Dacca Prakash*, and even though one could have expected the case to have had enough potential in terms of violence and salaciousness. And if it did not make the grade into contemporary *bhadralok* discourse, the chances of it entering conventional historical narratives were even slimmer. Doyhata raised no major point of legal significance; the local *bhadralok* historian Jogendranath Gupta was highly embarrassed by it; and the case obviously could find no place at all in the rich patriotic memory of a Bikrampur which in 1904–5 was entering the era of Swadeshi upsurge and revolutionary terrorism.<sup>5</sup> The Chandals or Namasudras of East Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were engaged in a series of movements for education, respectability and political status: the story of Prasanna could hardly contribute to the 'Sanskritizing' upward mobility of a despised caste. Even radical historians of peasant or subaltern protest are likely to have serious difficulties with a man whose plebeian fury found vent mainly against helpless women and a person of even lower social status than himself.

And yet historians today are getting interested precisely in such fragments of the past, 'unimportant' events of no obvious consequence which stick out and refuse to fit into any of the established patterns of historical reconstruction—akin, perhaps, to the Freudian slips of psychoanalysis and central to much social-anthropological work for quite some time. They afford oblique entry points into social history and can throw light upon dimensions obscured by

<sup>3</sup> Jogendranath Gupta, *Bikrampurer Itihas* (Calcutta, 1316/1909), p. 373.

<sup>4</sup> Jogendranath clearly took it for granted that his single cryptic reference would make sense for his readers.

<sup>5</sup> In the course of my work in the 1960s on the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, I went through *Bengalee*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, and a large number of contemporary pamphlets. I failed to notice the Doyhata case then: it did not engage the attention of a historian busy then, in the main, with reconstructing the narrative of *bhadralok* nationalism.

dominant—all too often teleological—analytical frameworks.<sup>6</sup>

Doyhata interested me, first, as a study in the problems of constructing historical narrative. Historians are becoming increasingly aware of the problematic nature of even the most conventionally ‘authentic sources’, that is to say documents which are contemporary, which do not contradict each other, and whose bias can be easily discovered and discounted. ‘Sources’ are always ‘texts’, it has been increasingly realized, and no text is ‘innocent’. It always embodies power relations and contains implicit principles or strategies of construction and deployment. Yet total relativism, a complete absorption in the enchantments of a kind of epistemological hall of mirrors, is hardly viable either for the discipline of history. The craft does seem to require the construction of narratives of the as-if-true’ kind, constructions which should remain open-ended and which are privileged only within the text the historian is engaged in composing at that moment.<sup>7</sup>

The information about Doyhata is, in conventional terms, both unusually detailed and fairly ‘reliable’. It is true that it comes through the double filter of judicial proceedings as reported in the *KM* pamphlet and two Calcutta newspapers. I have failed to trace so far the original court records, and the issues of *Dacca Prakash* from which *KM* was collated also do not seem available. But there is a high degree of correspondence—even, given the difference of language, near-identity—between the pamphlet and the *Bengalee* account of the Dacca court proceedings. We may assume also that British justice here was trying to be reasonably ‘impartial’: Doyhata had no political importance, and there was no need whatsoever for the prosecution to construct any ‘approver’s testimony’.<sup>8</sup> Prasanna

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, David W. Sabean, *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, 1984); Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (Penguin, 1985); and Ranajit Guha, ‘Chandra’s Death’, in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies V* (Delhi, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> For valuable accounts of similar problems in contemporary anthropology, see George E. Marcus and Michael M. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago, 1986); and James Clifford and George E. Marcus, ed., *Writing Culture* (California, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion of the ways in which colonial justice constructed approver’s testimony in a case of overriding political importance, see Shahid Amin, ‘Approver’s Testimony, Judicial Discourse: The Case of Chauri Chaura’, in *Subaltern Studies V*.

in fact admitted straightaway his principal role in the series of actions construed by the prosecution as murder, arson, and 'affront to feminine modesty,' and even his otherwise surprising claims that Ananda had consented to his own murder was confirmed by several bhadralok witnesses. There was little dispute, then, about the basic 'facts'. The differences of opinion turned around the degree of complicity of Lalmohan and Kalachand, and as to whether the killing of Ananda was culpable homicide or murder.

Together with the very detailed account of the climactic events of 23 Agrahayan coming from some twenty witnesses, all this permitted the construction of a narrative of the 'as if true' kind (see below, section III). Yet my primary interest was never in the reconstruction of what may have really happened. The Rankean past 'as it actually was' is both methodologically dubious and, in this study of an 'unimportant' event, akin to sheer antiquarianism. My interest lay in what was remembered about it, what forgotten, and why. The witnesses at Dacca were recalling events of three months back, in the unfamiliar atmosphere of a criminal court; most of them were relatives or neighbours of Lalmohan. What they recalled now about the pattern and meaning of events which culminated on 23 Agrahayan must have been influenced by the totally unexpected denouement of that evening and night. The predominantly bhadralok witnesses, bhadralok jurymen and newspaper reporters, and British judges, would all have tacit assumptions colouring their memories and assessments. What we have, in other words, is a series of representations of Doyhata which do not, in the end, build up into a scandal, and which do not enter markedly into either bhadralok or British official discourse. What is excluded from discourse often throws considerable light on the assumptions underlying it, and this for me has been a principal source of interest in the entire affair. Why precisely the bhadralok were embarrassed by Doyhata is a question, we shall see, which has to be tackled at a variety of levels.

'Kalki-avatar' was the shorthand title given to the Doyhata affair by the *Dacca Prakash* pamphlet, Calcutta newspapers, and Jogen-dranath Gupta alike. Yet the Dacca evidence does not quite bear out this centrality. Several witnesses stated that they had been unaware of Kalachand's claim to be Kalki, and the Chandal who abruptly became the chief protagonist on 23 Agrahayan does not seem to have used the phrase. I found copious evidence about the importance of Koli-yuga and Kalki-avatar themes, however, not in the well-

known high-bhadralok culture of the nineteenth century, but in what has been called the 'low-life of literature':<sup>9</sup> all but forgotten tracts, stories, plays and farces churned out by printing presses like those of Bat-tala in north Calcutta, as well as in some of the bazaar paintings of Kalighat. It became important for me to locate the social groups principally concerned in the late nineteenth century with producing and appropriating the kind of culture of which Koli-yuga seemed to be a major signifier. Tentatively, I found a distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture within the bhadralok more relevant here than a dichotomy of bhadralok/'popular' (or 'peasant'), for it helped me to focus upon an intermediate world of poor rustic Brahmins as well as their city counterparts, the clerks—the world which produced not only Kalachand but also Ramakrishna.

The Koli-yuga theme itself goes back to the Mahabharata: what was interesting were the specific readings of it in colonial Bengal and, in particular, plays based upon it, at least one of which became part of the repertoire of a *jatra* company which toured the *mufassil* in the early years of the twentieth century. Nineteenth-century versions of Koli-yuga gave a crucial centrality to women: more precisely to two contrasting figures of women—the disorderly 'modern' wife who dominates the husband and ill-treats the mother-in-law, and the positive alternative of the pure mother or wife who helps to restore norms through a fascinating pattern of assertion-within-deference. The first emerges in some plays as a metaphor for sons neglecting the 'mother' land through enthralment to foreign ways; the second, by the 1920s, had become a standard figure in nationalist pulp literature.<sup>10</sup> The insubordinate Shudra, at least as prominent in earlier Koli-yuga texts as the woman-on-top, is hardly ever mentioned in nineteenth-century versions; we do have, however, occasional plebeian figures contributing to the restoration of norms through a similar figure of deferential assertion. Quite unexpectedly, it appeared, I had stumbled upon one of the cultural roots of passive resistance or *satyagraha*—simultaneously mobilizing and keeping under controls of deference peasants and women alike.

Doyhata now emerged as both related to as well as, in a more im-

<sup>9</sup> I am borrowing this phrase from Robert Darnton, 'The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France,' *Past and Present*, no. 51, May 1971.

<sup>10</sup> Tanika Sarkar, 'Nationalist Iconography: Image of Women in 19th century Bengali Literature,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, xxii 47, 21 November 1987.

portant sense, disjointed from this evolving pattern of feelings. Its significance lay precisely in its ‘irrelevance’, its failure to enter dominant middle-class forms of discourse. What had happened that December night had been a conflict of meanings, of vastly different readings of a ‘common’ Hindu religious tradition of *puranas* and epics—for Prasanna’s actions on 23 Agrahayan were all embedded in a kind of inverted appropriation of the motifs and values of Brahminical culture. The bhadralok did not want to talk about Doyhata, for over it loomed the dark, terrifying yet fascinating, figure of the Chandal, who, invited in by one of themselves, had for one night turned their world upside down.

## II

Doyhata village adjoins the police station of Srinagar, which is sixteen miles west of the subdivisional headquarters of Munshigunj. Munshigunj, and the northern part of Madaripur subdivision of Faridpur from which it is divided by the Padma river, together make up the Bikrampur region, a classic heartland of the Bengali Hindu bhadralok. The local historian Jogendranath Gupta in 1909 enumerated in loving detail its past and present achievements: this was the land of Ballal Sen, supposedly the founder of Bengali caste hierarchy and Kulinism, of Kedar Roy who had fought the Mughals, of Rajballabh in the eighteenth century. Bikrampur had been a centre of Sanskrit learning as reputed as Nabadwip, and it was the birthplace of a whole series of nineteenth- and early-twentieth century bhadralok worthies.<sup>11</sup> Gupta claimed that virtually every Munshigunj village had its university graduates, and he was proud of the twenty-four High English schools in the subdivision. He made a special mention of the absence of big zamindaries in Munshigunj as a positive feature, conducive to broader development of the *madhyabitta* (middle class), and attributed it to certain administrative policies of the eighteenth-century nawabs.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ballal Sen is supposed to have had his capital in Rampal, six miles west of Munshigunj. The list of nineteenth and early twentieth century luminaries given by Gupta include Rashbehari Mukhopadhyay, the campaigner against Kulin polygamy; the militant Brahmo Dwarkanath Ganguli; literary figures like the poet Gobindachandra Roy; Congress leaders like Lalmohan Ghosh and Chittaranjan Das; and the Scientist Jagadishchandra Basu. *Gupta, passim*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

British representations of the Bikrampur bhadralok aimed at greater statistical precision, but were otherwise broadly similar. Officials were struck by the density of population of Munshiganj and Madaripur, extraordinary for an overwhelmingly rural tract.<sup>13</sup> They noted that Bikrampur was a land of small, highly-fragmented zamindaries rather than big estates and/or multiple intermediate tenures, as in Mymensingh to the north and Bakargunj to the south.<sup>14</sup> For the British, the achievements of Bikrampur bhadralok culture were less administratively relevant than the fact that Munshiganj subdivision alone supplied 'nearly a third of the subordinate native officials in the Government offices of Bengal'<sup>15</sup>—a preponderance attributed to small estates, a heavy concentration of bhadralok castes, and a high level of English education.<sup>16</sup>

The Majumdars of Doyhata seem to have been gentlefolk similar to so many others in Bikrampur, quite unknown to the historical record but for that strange winter night of December 1904. Lalmohan referred in his testimony to a *praja* (tenant) of his, and a couple of witnesses described him as their *manib* (master, employer).<sup>17</sup> But the total helplessness of the Majumdars in face of the terror unleashed by just one man, Prasanna, indicates that they could only have been petty zamindars or talukdars: evidently they commanded no *lathials* (clubmen) or *durwans* (guards).

<sup>13</sup> Munshiganj in 1901 had a density of 1654 per square mile, with 978 villages in an area of only 386 square miles. There was nothing classifiable as a town, for even the subdivisional headquarters had a population of only 964. Mardaripur's statistics are similar: a density of 913, with a town of 17,463, and 1806 villages spread over 993 square miles. B. C. Allen, E. A. Gait, C. H. Allen, H. F. Howard, *Gazeteer of Bengal and North-East India* (n.d.; repr. Delhi, 1979), pp. 300, 341.

<sup>14</sup> Hunter noted these features of Dacca zamindari tenure in his *Statistical Account of Bengal*, volume v (London, 1877, repr. Delhi, 1973), pp. 97, 118. Of the 7215 permanently-settled zamindari estates in Dacca district in the early twentieth century, only 192 paid an annual revenue of more than £50 (roughly Rs 500), and there were seldom more than two middlemen between the zamindar and the *raiyats*. Faridpur had 5998 zamindari estates, with only 5 paying revenue of more than Rs 10,000. Allen, *et al.*, p. 342.

<sup>15</sup> Allen, *et al.*, p. 311.

<sup>16</sup> Of the 988,000 (in round figures) classified as Hindus in Dacca district by the 1901 Census, 66,000 were Brahmuns, 86,000 Kayasths, and 11,000 Baidyas; 57,125 out of a population of 638, 351 were literate in Munshiganj subdivision, as against a Dacca district literacy rate of 6.5 per cent. The district had 171 secondary and 1632 primary schools. Allen *et al.*, pp. 301, 309.

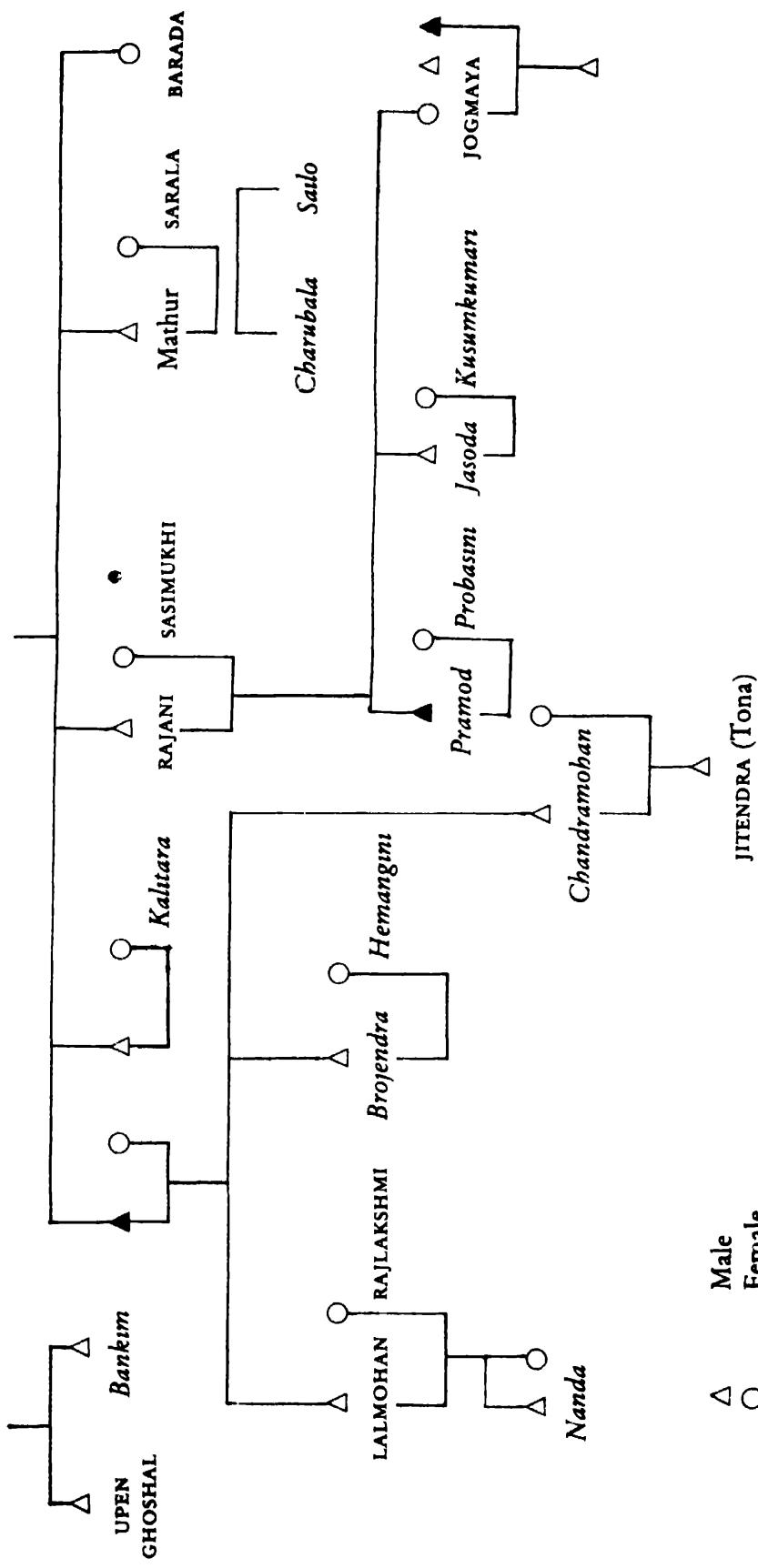
<sup>17</sup> KM, pp. 10, 67.

Jogendranath Gupta's cryptic sentence about the Kalki-avatar of Doyhata is followed immediately by a comment deplored the absence of Bikrampur bhadralok menfolk from their homes for the greater part of the year due to the jobs they held outside the district. The *chotolok* (as well as, presumably, the women), he said, consequently live without *shashan* (order, discipline), and some of them become preachers of *andha dharma mat* (blind religious beliefs).<sup>18</sup> Certainly the Dacca court reports reveal the Majumdar household to have been full of women. The family house had three *dalans* or wings, held by Lalmohan (father presumably deceased), Rajani and Mathur (Lalmohan's father's younger brothers). Only two men of the immediate household appeared in the trial: Lalmohan himself, who practised medicine in the village with or without a proper degree, and the sixty-five year old Rajani.<sup>19</sup> Two other male relatives who lived in neighbouring houses figured among the witnesses: the seventeen-year-old Jitendramohan Majumdar (nicknamed Tona), a nephew of Lalmohan, and Lalmohan's cousin Upendrachandra Ghoshal, a zamindari employee. The women who gave evidence easily outnumbered the men: Lalmohan's wife Rajlakshmi; Rajani's wife Sasimukhi and daughter Jogmaya; Mathur's wife Sarala; and Barada, a sister of Rajani and Mathur. The other women directly involved were Lalmohan's sister-in-law Hemangini; Kalitara (an aunt of Lalmohan's by marriage); Kusumkumari (wife of Rajani's son Jasoda); Prabasini (widow of Rajani's deceased son Pramod); the mothers (unnamed) of Lalmohan and Tona; and Chapala, described as the wife of a *nafar* (bonded servant) of Rajani. All of them were stripped by Prasanna, or at least insulted in some way. Only the two daughters of Sarala, Sailo and Charubala, seem to have been spared. It was their illness, as we shall see, which in a way precipitated the crisis. The tentative diagram on p. 10 may help to make the family relationships clearer.

So far we have been talking about the bhadralok alone, but gentry cannot live or prosper without the labour of others. Bikrampur was also the land of a far larger number of subordinate groups. Actual cultivation would be the job of Muslim or lower-caste tenants or sharecroppers, and the gentry by the turn of the century were increasingly preferring produce-rent terms in the context of rising

<sup>18</sup> Gupta, p. 373.

<sup>19</sup> 'A small unqualified medical practitioner,' was the Calcutta high court judgment's description of Lalmohan. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 29 June 1905.



▲ Male  
○ Female  
◆ Deceased

► Names in small capitals indicate people who gave evidence in the case.

Names in italics indicate people who figured in 23 Agrahayan incidents but did not give evidence.

There is no mention of Lalmohan's father. As Lalmohan is described as co-holder of the family house, I presume he was dead. Open Ghoshal described himself as a cousin of Lalmohan: the precise relationship remains uncertain.

prices.<sup>20</sup> The silence of Jogendranath Gupta is symptomatic here: no one would guess from his book that Muslims constituted 51.1 per cent of the population of Munshiganj,<sup>21</sup> or that Chandals (or Namasudras, as their upwardly mobile sections had started calling themselves)<sup>22</sup> were nearly a quarter of the Hindus of Dacca district and three-sevenths of the Hindus of Faridpur.<sup>23</sup> The bhadralok local history of Bikrampur was not about people like them.

British administrative and ethnographic accounts are more forthcoming about these lower depths. Hunter described Chandals in 1877 as 'very low and despised . . . cultivators, grass-cutters, gardeners, boatmen and palanquin-bearers'.<sup>24</sup> An upper crust of substantial peasants and traders, however, was emerging among them, particularly in the marshlands of south Faridpur and north-west Bakharganj (Gopalganj and Firozepur police stations), which Chandals had colonized and where they were overwhelmingly predominant. This became the centre of a Namasudra upthrust, beginning with the foundation of a new Vaishnava sect called Matua by the rich-peasant Biswas family of Orakandi village in Gopalganj. There were efforts at 'Sanskritization' through the introduction of child-marriage and of the widow-remarriage taboo, as well as occasional refusals of service to the upper castes—as in Gopalganj and Muksudpur thanas in 1872–3. Schools were founded with missionary help, insistent claims made for the Namasudra title, and a struggle waged against *dhankarari* (fixed produce-rent) tenancies. Eventually, full-fledged caste organizations emerged, with a Namasudra Hitaishini Samiti, periodic conferences from 1908 onwards, and

<sup>20</sup> Partha Chatterji, *Bengal 1920–1947: The Land Question* (Calcutta, 1984), pp. 50–2.

<sup>21</sup> Hunter, p. 118, citing the 1872 Census.

<sup>22</sup> The demand for the new, more respectable name was gradually accepted by the British. Hunter (1877) used the term Chandal throughout. H H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, volume 1 (Calcutta, 1891, repr. Calcutta, 1981) did the same, but added that the more successful Chandals preferred to call themselves Namasudras. Allen *et al.* talk about Namasudras alone, and the Census of 1911 dropped the use of the term Chandal. Both Chandal and Namasudra were used in the Dacca case to describe Prasanna.

<sup>23</sup> The Chandals or Namasudras numbered 236,000 in Dacca District in 1901. In Faridpur the bulk of the Namasudra populace (245,000 in 1881) was concentrated in Madripur subdivision and the marshy region to its south. Risley, p. 189; Hunter, p. 342.

<sup>24</sup> Hunter, p. 50.

journals. The Biswas family of Orankandi remained the core of this developing movement.<sup>25</sup> As bhadralok patriotism gathered strength, the British exhibited a certain sympathy for such aspirations; concern within limits for the underdog in Indian society in any case fitted well with the self-image of the paternalist raj. Risley's comment in 1891 reveals the early stages in the construction of a stereotype: the Chandals is 'one of the most lovable of Bengalis . . . a merry, careless fellow, very patient and hard-working . . . a peaceful and exemplary subject of the English Government.'<sup>26</sup>

The Bhuinmali were a much smaller and even more despised group—12,581 in Dacca and 8263 in Faridpur in 1881. Cultivators, musicians, *palki*-bearers and scavengers, they were

village servants employed in cutting down brushwood, repairing foot-paths, sweeping the outside of the zamindar's house, removing carcasses from the village . . . obliged to live on the outskirts of villages apart from the Hindus, and to perform any menial work that is required of them.

Bhuinmali women swept courtyards and were employed as midwives and domestic servants. Like the Chandals, Vaishnavism was strong among them, and, like the Chandals again, they had become by the 1880s 'most anxious to represent themselves as Sudras, by aping the prejudices of the higher ranks.' Possibly relevant for the Doyhata incident is the fact that Bhuinmali efforts at social ascent immediately brought them into conflict above all with the Chandals/Namasudras. Much 'secret jealousy' and some 'open feuds' were reported between them, and the Bhuinmali started refusing to eat with Chandals and became reluctant to work for them.<sup>27</sup>

Literacy rates among Chandals and Bhuinmalis were abysmally low, while, in yet another inversion of the bhadralok stereotype, both groups had a reputation of great physical strength.<sup>28</sup> Along with Muslims, they provided the bulk of clubmen (*lathials*) and watchmen (*chaukidars*). There are indications, however, of a rich oral culture: 'Singing is a favourite amusement, and a Chandal crew

<sup>25</sup> Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste and Politics in Eastern Bengal: The Namasudras and the Anti-Partition Agitation, 1905–1911* (Centre for S. E. Asian Studies, Calcutta University, 1981); Hunter, p. 285; Risley, p. 188.

<sup>26</sup> Risley, pp. 188–9.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 105–7, 188.

<sup>28</sup> The percentage of literacy among Namasudras in 1901 was 3.3. Sekhar Bandopadhyay, p. 10.

is rarely without some musical instrument.' Music was one of the caste occupations of the Bhuinmali.<sup>29</sup> Even Jogendranath Gupta broke his silence about the lower orders to write a couple of pages about Bikrampur popular religious life: significantly, he placed it in his text just before the sentence about Doyhata. Gupta mentioned particularly the low-caste worship of Trinath, a syncretist cult combining adoration of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. *Ganja* and religious songs, presumably of the *kirtan* type, were its principal ingredients, and the song which he records declares that through the worship of Trinath 'the people of Koli-yuga can weather all storms'.<sup>30</sup> *Ganja*, devotional songs, Koli-yuga—all these figure notably in our Doyhata story.

The scanty information available about the Chandal and the Bhuinmali involved in the case permits few inferences about their possible linkages with the broader life of their communities. Ananda Bhuinmali's father, Krishna, did appear in court to state that his son had been a stay-at-home type till Kalachand and Prasanna turned up in their village (in Piyarpur thana, near Kamarkhali, in the extreme north-west of Faridpur) during the previous Baisakh and again in Agrahayan (April-May, November-December 1904). The two were staying on both occasions in low-caste houses, of a Das and a Patuni (boatman), and 'used to sing, smoke *ganja*, and talk like sadhus.' Ananda used to sit with them and occasionally stay over for a night or two, and one day in Agraheyan he slipped away from his father's house and village without explanation.<sup>31</sup> About Prasanna Chandal's background we know even less, for no relative or friend of his came to testify at Dacca. Presumably he had long since broken free of ties of kin and locality. We are told only, by Kalachand, that his surname was Dhetamandal, his father's name Bhagirath, and that he came from Jainasar (the Dacca district gazeteer mentions a post office of that name). The sadhu met him for the first time at the 'last Langulbandh [Nangalbandh] bathing festival'.<sup>32</sup>

Both Ananda and Prasanna evidently shared a leaning towards some kind of Vaishnavism, in common with many Chandals and Bhuinmalis. Ananda's father was named Krishna, the two had left

<sup>29</sup> Risley, pp. 189, 106.

<sup>30</sup> Jogendranath Gupta, p. 372.

<sup>31</sup> Evidence of Krishna Bhuinmali, *KM*, p. 59.

<sup>32</sup> Testimony of Kalachand Sadhu at Srinagar, *ibid.*, p. 5.

home to follow someone who, as we shall see, insisted on devotion to Hari alone, and they called their guru Gossain, as Vaishnavas do.<sup>33</sup> The other impression we get is of a highly mobile, fluid world of wandering sadhus and their predominantly lower-caste devotees, knitted together by meetings at religious festivals (among which Nangalbandh, a few miles north of Munshigunj, is one of the most popular), and developing through ganja and devotional songs a conviviality or *communitas* which could cut across barriers of caste and class. The devotional focus, however, would normally be provided by a high-caste sadhu.

Two very different worlds, then, with relations governed by firmly established norms of strict subordination and deference—the Bikrampur bhadralok, inordinately proud of their formal learning and culture; and the illiterate and despised low-castes and untouchables. And yet they came together, briefly and explosively, in the house of the Majumdars of Doyhata. The link figure was Kalikumar Chakrabarti, or Kalachand Sadhu, coming from an unnamed village in Madaripur subdivision. The wife, elder brother, and father-in-law of Kalikumar came to his trial. Pratapchandra Chakrabarti, the father-in-law, described himself as a *tabsildar* (minor revenue official), and the family evidently had the resources to engage some legal help. Kalikumar, the court was told, had taught in his village school for Rs 15. The pandit of that school made him a ganja addict, and he started beating up his wife and children and quarrelling with his father-in-law. Kalikumar had left home three years earlier. He had briefly returned the previous Aswin (September-October), and his elder brother, Laksmanchandra, had tried to keep him in chains – for ‘he was like a mad person . . . smoking a lot of ganja and taking rice from any and everybody’ (i.e. breaking caste food taboos).<sup>34</sup> Lalmohan’s uncle Rajani testified that the sadhu’s message was ‘Kali is nothing, Hari is all’,<sup>35</sup> and perhaps the way he changed his name is significant, for ‘Kalikumar’ has Shakta associations, while Kalachand of course is Krishna.

Figures like Kalachand were by no means rare in the Bengal countryside. In his account of Dacca Hunter talks about ‘religious enthusiasts’ who ‘leave their occupations and become itinerant preachers of Hari through *sankirtan*, who dispense faith-healing . . .

<sup>33</sup> Testimony of Prasanna at Srinagar and Munshigunj, *ibid.*, pp. 7, 16.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

as specific for all maladies.<sup>36</sup> Kalachand, too, claimed at Doyhata that his *caranamrita* and the ashes from his *kalki* had healing powers. More generally, and with or without specifically 'religious' overtones, the poor (or at least not too well-off) village Brahmin drop-out became a typical figure in much early twentieth-century Bengali literature. The husband of Biraj-bau for instance, in Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's bestseller of that name (1914), responded to deepening financial crisis by immersion in the Mahabharata, ganja and kirtan. In Saratchandra's semi-autobiographical novel *Srikanta* (1917) the Brahmin youth escapes from respectability to seek adventure in a shifting, relatively uninhibited, plebeian world, and the wandering Brahmin recurs, though in a more etherealized form, in Rabindranath's short-story 'Atithi'.

The householder, seeking solace from the tedium of a humdrum existence and genteel poverty in ganja, kirtan, and unfamiliar cults; the village youth who runs away to a dangerous and therefore attractive underworld; the wandering sadhu with lower-caste disciples who eventually acquires bhadralok patrons and wins respectability, maybe even fame—all these figures slide into each other and are marked fundamentally by the crossing and recrossing of social frontiers. Such fluidity, almost certainly, was nothing new, but colonial conditions could have enhanced it in several ways. The upper-caste literati which stuck to old forms of learning—whether out of choice or lack of opportunity—lost patronage and prestige as English education penetrated deeper into the rural bhadralok. Its landholdings could, in addition, be pulverized over time, given an active land market. The new learning was not a guarantee for success, for it was soon producing its own quota of relative failures—depressed clerks or humble town or village schoolteachers. The myth of a Koli-yuga painted in lurid colours and occasional dreams of an apocalyptic Kalki-avatar were likely to take root precisely in such a milieu.

A bit of 'modern' education and a smattering of Brahminical culture—such as the ex-schoolteacher Kalikumar presumably had—could go some way, however, towards winning admirers from lower down the social scale, while a devotion to Hari, expressed mainly through ganja and song, fitted in well with established patterns of popular religion in Bikrampur, both Vaishnavism in its more

<sup>36</sup> Hunter, p. 56.

plebeian manifestations and cults like that of Trinath. Kalachand's subsequent success in entering the Majumdar household indicates an ability to straddle two worlds. What seems important in such cases of crossing of margins, however, is the direction and ultimate destination of the journey, for on that apparently depends success or failure in conquering respectability. Way back in the seventeenth century, a Brahmin youth named Rupram Chakrabarti ran away from his *tol* to live among the untouchable Hadi community. He picked up from their oral traditions the stories about Lausen, and re-emerged after many years to win the patronage of a zamindar and write a famous Dharma-mangal Kavya. Sukumar Sen has suggested a parallel between Rupram and the early life of Saratchandra,<sup>37</sup> and in the mid nineteenth century the life of the celebrated *panchali* composer Dasarathi Roy reveals a similar pattern of descent followed by ascent.<sup>38</sup> It was perfectly respectable, even laudable, also, for a Brahmin religious leader to have low-caste disciples: that Chaitanya had extended his bounty even to Chandals was a much-quoted saying in the late nineteenth century. And Ramakrishna is only the best-known example of the sadhu with rustic poor Brahmin origins conquering parts of the bhadralok world. Another instance, not far from Doyhata, was Loknath Brahmachari of Barudi, a village in Dacca district.<sup>39</sup> What went wrong with the Doyhata Kalki-avatar, however, was that the direction of movement and influence got abruptly reversed when the Chandal Prasanna took over on 23 Agrahayan.

### III

'In Aswin or Kartik', some two months before the denouement of 23 Agrahayan, Lalmohan recalled in his initial deposition, a low-caste praja of his named Nabin Mistri asked him 'to come and see a

<sup>37</sup> Sukumar Sen, *Saratchandrika*, Preface to Sen, ed., *Saratsahityasangraha* (Calcutta, 1988).

<sup>38</sup> Haripada Chakrabarti, *Dasarathi o Tnahan Panchali* (Calcutta, 1960), chapter 11.

<sup>39</sup> Loknath, a wandering sadhu for many years, eventually set up an ashrama in Barudi patronized by the local Nag zamindar family. To Satyacharan Mitra, author of one of the earliest biographies of Ramakrishna, 'the Brahmachari of Barudi' was an equal of Ramakrishna himself. Satyacharan Mitra, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa* (Jivani o Upadesh; Calcutta, 1304/1897), pp. 2, 69; Saratkamini Basu, *Sri Sri Satguru-Kathamrita* (Dacca, 1335/1928), pp. 43–5.

sadhu who had turned up in his house accompanied by a Prasanna Namasudra.' Lalmohan went and saw 'the sadhu singing with an *ektara* . . . I looked at his face, it seemed like that of a boy, and *Vatsalyabhava* (paternal feelings) was evoked in me.'<sup>40</sup> Kalachand also 'talked like a proper sadhu', but apparently Lalmohan was not at first so impressed by his words. He invited the sadhu to come over to the Majumdar house, for 'a Brahmin's son should not stay with a Chandal'.<sup>41</sup> Lalmohan joined the singing and ganja sessions, began losing interest in his medical practice, and 'spent much time in idleness . . . saying, if asked about anything, "The Sadhu will provide everything, there is nothing to worry about."'<sup>42</sup> Until then he had been treating poor people without taking fees, and was fond of his wife and only son.<sup>43</sup>

The initial encounter, then, was conventional enough. The boyish—even childlike—appearance and behaviour of many sadhus often constituted a major attraction for the middle-aged of both sexes, and this could be easily structured into the well-known *vatsalya* form of Vaishnava devotion. The devotee searching for a guru often looks for a kind of elective affinity rather than a new message, and so for Lalmohan the appearance and personality of Kalachand were more important than this teachings. An early biography of Ramakrishna, for instance, included an entire section on the saint's 'Balak-bhava'.<sup>44</sup> The deliberate 'feminization' associated with many forms of Vaishnava devotion often involved a turning away from external activity. Ramakrishna, in sharp contrast to Vivekananda, condemned social activism, even philanthropic work, and several of the characters in Girishchandra Ghosh's plays clearly modelled on him wander around preaching passive acceptance of Hari.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Deposition of Lalmohan at Srinagar, *KM*, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Evidence of Lalmohan's wife Rajlakshmi at Dacca, *ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>43</sup> Evidence of Jitendramohan Majumdar (Tona), Lalmohan's nephew, *ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>44</sup> Satyacharan Mitra, pp. 150–2. Loknath Brahmachari made Bijoykrishna Goswami's wife Jogmaya feed him with her own hands, insisting that she scold him if he stopped eating. Saratkamini Basu, *Satprasanga* (Dacca, 1327/1920), p. 37.

<sup>45</sup> See particularly Ramakrishna's account of his conversation with Sambhucharan Mallik, which is repeated six times in the *Kathamrita* but is omitted from the later *Lilaprasanga*: Sumit Sarkar, *The Kathamrita As Text: Towards An Understanding of Ramakrishna Paramhansa*, Occasional Papers, no. 22 (New Delhi, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, April 1985).

When there is someone to worry for you, why worry yourself? Think, when you were a child, you happily sucked your mother's breasts, your mother did all the worrying—today, if you stop worrying, Hari will worry for you. . . . Let them take you where they will, you go reciting Hari's name.<sup>46</sup>

Lalmohan's uncle, the sixty-five-year-old Rajani Majumdar, testified that 'I, too, used to go to the sadhu, and discussed matters of *dharma* with him': the relationship here seems to have been slightly more 'intellectual' than in the case of Lalmohan. The sadhu did not like the Majumdar family practice of holding Kali-puja, and Rajani asked him to leave the day before Deepanwita Puja (i.e. Diwali).<sup>47</sup> Like many sadhus, Kalachand claimed miraculous healing powers, dispensing them through his charanamrita and, less conventionally, ashes from the pipe (kalki) that he used to smoke ganja.<sup>48</sup> The verbal coincidence here with Kalki-avatar seems to have had a strange fascination for both Kalachand and Prasanna.<sup>49</sup> During this first stay with the Majumdars, however, Kalachand made little or no reference to the Kalki-avatar, and nor did Prasanna leave much of an independent impression that time. But Rajani recalled that Prasanna 'talked so fast that it was often difficult to follow him':<sup>50</sup> not really a trivial detail if we remember that ordinarily a Chandal would have remained deferentially silent in a gentry house if allowed to enter it at all. Certainly, he could never have dreamt of smoking ganja with upper-caste people. Incessant speech was an indication of the sense of liberation and self-confidence which the new cult was bringing to this untouchable devotee and speech in his case would later develop into abuse directed at superiors.<sup>51</sup>

Kalachand went off around Diwali to stay for some time with

<sup>46</sup> Nasiram's words in the play *Nasiram* (1888), III. ii *Girish Rachanavali* (Calcutta, 1969), volume iv, pp. 239–40.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 55; *Bengalee*, 17 March 1905.

<sup>48</sup> Evidence of Tona, *KM*, p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> For an example of similarity in sounds helping to constitute a whole alternative plebeian cosmogony, see Sudhir Chakrabarty's work on the Balarami sect of Nadia among the untouchable Hadi community. 'Hadi' resembles Had (bones), and this coincidence is central to the mythology of this sect. Sudhir Chakrabarty, *Balarami Sampraday Tadar Gan* (Calcutta, 1987).

<sup>50</sup> *Bengalee*, 17 March 1905.

<sup>51</sup> For speech and abuse as an indicator of plebeian inversion of social order, see Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983), chapter II.

Purna Sarkar, another Doyhata devotee whose house lay three fields away.<sup>52</sup> Lalmohan often went to visit the sadhu there.<sup>53</sup> Prasanna seems to have left the village for a time, and Kalachand, too, briefly went back home; the two also visited Ananda's village in early Agraḥayan.<sup>54</sup>

With the return of Kalachand to the Majumdar house some seven or eight days before Thursday, 23 Agraḥayan, the pace of events quickened and took a different turn. Several members of the family fell ill around this time—Lalmohan's wife Rajlakshmi as well as Charubala and Sailo, the two daughters of Mathur and Sarala, who may have had cholera.<sup>55</sup> Lalmohan refused to treat them and asked them to 'trust in Kalachand'. 'I have surrendered my dispensary itself at the sadhu's feet', he told his relative and neighbour Upendrachandra Ghoshal.<sup>56</sup> Lalmohan also started telling some neighbours—Upendrachandra and a moneylender named Mohimchandra Sarkar—that the sadhu was Kalki-avatar, and 'a yuga-pralay [cataclysmic end of the epoch] was coming, many will fall ill.' He even mentioned a date for the apocalypse—18 Paus—'when my sadhu will assume his real form'.<sup>57</sup> Incidentally, the women of the family seem to have remained on the whole more hardheaded about Kalachand than the resident menfolk. Rajlakshmi recalled at Srinagar that the sadhu had failed to cure her fever, and Sarala, when her daughter Charubala fell ill, tried to get some medicine from Upendra Ghoshal first, despite Lalmohan's insistence that the sadhu could cure everything.<sup>58</sup>

Ananda Bhuinmali turned up on Monday 19 Agraḥayan, very dark and frightening in appearance.<sup>59</sup> With Prasanna's return next day, 'the singing and the music stopped.' The Chandals had started abusing those who did not show sufficient respect to Kalachand,

<sup>52</sup> Tona, *KM*, p. 24. Purna Sarkar did not give evidence at Dacca, and little more can be learnt about him.

<sup>53</sup> Evidence of Lalmohan's wife Rajlakshmi Devi at Dacca, *ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>54</sup> Evidence of Kalachand and Ananda's relatives, *ibid.*, pp. 72, 59.

<sup>55</sup> *Bengalee*, 14 March 1905.

<sup>56</sup> Evidence of Upendrachandra Ghoshal, *KM*, p. 62.

<sup>57</sup> Evidence of Upendrachandra Ghoshal and Mahimchandra Sarkar, *ibid.*, pp. 63, 66.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21; *Bengalee*, 17 March 1905. Sarala started believing, however—or so Rajlakshmi asserted—after Sailo improved a bit through the sadhu's treatment. *KM*, p. 46.

<sup>59</sup> Testimony of Kalachand at Srinagar, *ibid.*, p. 5.

particularly the women, while Tona recalled him flaunting a bow.<sup>60</sup>

The apocalypse became associated with the killing of Yama, the god of death, somehow identified with Ananda: 'The sadhu has come to our house, and brought Yama here. . . No one would have to worry about anything once Yama has been killed. No one on the earth will have to fear Yama. . .'.<sup>61</sup> This identification as well as the entry of the Yama theme remains the most obscure aspect of the entire affair. All that we are told is that Ananda had a 'fearsome' appearance (according to Kalachand); that Prasanna on the day of the murder had a fight with him at mealtime for refusing to remove his own plate after eating (there is a trace here, possibly, of the contemporary quarrels over precedence between Namasudras and Bhuinmalis);<sup>62</sup> that 'everybody called Ananda Yama',<sup>63</sup> and that somehow both the ending of the chain of illnesses which had beset the Mazumdar family and the impending *yugapralay* had got associated with the killing of Ananda-Yama. As for Ananda himself, it seems unlikely that he accepted—or maybe even knew of—this identification with the god of death. Prasanna, however, in his deposition at Munshigunj, claimed that Ananda had agreed to his own ritual murder:

Brother, why does Gossain keep himself hidden for so long? You kill me, and make manifest the *satyadharma*. Gossain is *Jagatguru*; he will bring me back to life if you kill me, and then the English and everyone else will know about his greatness [*mahima64*

Tona confirmed that Ananda had made such a suggestion, and Lalmohan added that Prasanna had told the Bhuinmali disciple: 'Surrender yourself to Kalachand, you will receive a divine body [*dibyadeha*]'.<sup>65</sup>

On the afternoon of 23 Agrahayan, Prasanna killed Ananda in the presence of Kalachand, Lalmohan and Tona, with Jogmaya seeing it happen from behind a hedge while she was cutting fish. He attacked him first with the sadhu's trident and then with the knife they used

<sup>60</sup> Evidence of Rajani's wife Sashimukhi, and of Tona, *ibid.*, pp. 50, 25.

<sup>61</sup> Mahimachandra Sarkar, reporting a conversation with Lalmohan *ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>62</sup> Rajani's evidence, *Bengalee*, 17 March 1905.

<sup>63</sup> Tona's evidence, *Bengalee*, 14 March 1905.

<sup>64</sup> Prasanna's deposition at Munshigunj, *KM*, p. 16. In his first deposition, at Srinagar, Prasanna had merely stated that he had had a quarrel with Ananda over matters of worship and ritual ('*sadhana-bhajan*'), *ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>65</sup> Tona, *ibid.*, p. 31; Lalmohan's deposition at Srinagar, *ibid.*, p. 10.

to prepare ganja, and slit what Lalmohan with his medical knowledge recognized to be the 'carotid artery'. At Kalachand's orders Prasanna, Lalmohan and Tona threw the dead body outside the house.<sup>66</sup> Prasanna then proclaimed his intention of making 'the world red,' to smash and burn everything around, describing this in court as 'burning Lanka'.<sup>67</sup> 'I'll burn all the wife's sisters' (*shali*—used at times as a term of abuse), and he also declared, 'All the women will have to come naked before the Gossain, or else none of them will be spared.'<sup>68</sup>

Apart from a brief abortive bid to set fire to Rajani's house, the targets of Prasanna's arson efforts were raiyat homesteads: those of Mahim Mandal and Harachand De, both prajas of Lalmohan, and of Rajmohan Bhuinmali.<sup>69</sup> He had planned also, as Prasanna stated at Munshiganj, to set fire to the Muslim quarter ('*Musalman para*').<sup>70</sup>

The women of the Majumdar household, about a dozen in all, were made to take off their clothes, touch a fire, and prostrate themselves before Kalachand. This done, they were allowed to dress and leave. When Tona's mother tried to resist, Prasanna urinated on her. Lalmohan's wife Rajlakshmi got special treatment: Prasanna forced her to stand naked on his knees 'in the posture of Kali,' burnt her pubic hair, thrust a kalki into her vagina, and made her kick her husband three times. Lalmohan was punished thus because he had refused to kill his son Nanda, despite Prasanna's promise that he would get 'a golden son' in return.<sup>71</sup> The other bhadralok men around were not spared either. Umesh Kabiraj, a passer-by who had caught a glimpse of the murder, was hit on the head by Prasanna and made to flee. Upendrachandra Ghoshal, the nextdoor neighbour and relative, was stripped, had his sacred thread torn, and told to walk back naked to his house—an order he meekly obeyed.<sup>72</sup>

Prasanna claimed in his deposition at Srinagar that the 'burning of Lanka', as well as the other actions, had been planned beforehand

<sup>66</sup> Depositions of Prasanna, Lalmohan and Jogmaya, *KM*, pp. 8, 11–12, 35.

<sup>67</sup> *Bengalee*, 14 March 1905; deposition of Barada Devi at Dacca and of Prasanna at Srinagar, *KM*, pp. 39–42.

<sup>68</sup> Prasanna's deposition at Munshiganj, *ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>69</sup> All three appeared as witnesses at Dacca, *ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>71</sup> The treatment of women that night is described in *KM*, pp. 6–9, 12–13, 15, 19, 21–2, 28, 36–7, 41, 45, 49–50, 61–2.

<sup>72</sup> Evidence of Umesh Kabiraj and Upendrachandra Ghoshal, *ibid.*, pp. 60–1.

by 'Thakur' (Kalachand), Lalmohan and himself.<sup>73</sup> Many witnesses mentioned the active role of Lalmohan and the complicity of the sadhu, despite their efforts in court to wriggle out of responsibility. Lalmohan helped to bring in the women before Kalachand, and Upen Ghoshal recalled that he had made him do a *pranam*, after which Lalmohan put his feet upon his head.<sup>74</sup> Kalachand and Lalmohan assured the women: 'You come naked to the world, you have to leave it naked—why be afraid? . . . How does this ruin *satitva* [purity, chastity]?'<sup>75</sup> It is evident however, that the Chandal was calling all the tunes from the time of the murder onwards. Lalmohan, too, received some kicks and blows, though no disrespect seems ever to have been shown by Prasanna to the sadhu.

The terror continued till early next morning, when Prasanna was at last overpowered by a group of villagers led by Mahim Sarkar after what is said to have been a two-hour fight. Prasanna was shouting then: 'All the soldiers of Bharat together will not be able to do anything to me.'<sup>76</sup> Lalmohan and Kalachand had already slipped away to the house of Purna Sarkar, from where the police arrested them.

In general, the bhadralok menfolk cut remarkably poor figures in the Doyhata evidence. Umesh Kabiraj did not complain to the police about Prasanna's assault and the fracas he had seen, for 'he wanted to avoid getting involved in a case'.<sup>77</sup> Upen Ghoshal submitted to the humiliation of walking back to his house naked, carrying his dhoti in his hands. Tona's complicity is clear: he helped to throw away Ananda's body, and his evidence reveals that he was present virtually throughout. Returning home later than evening, Rajani Majumdar was told by Umesh and then by his own daughter Jogmaya about what was happening. Rajani smoked, went out to relieve himself, had dinner, had some inconclusive discussions (*paramarsha*) with Upen Ghoshal as to what could be done, and only several hours later tried to get help from the 'raiyatpara' (peasant quarter). Prasanna stopped him on the way, took off his clothes, and tied him to a tree. Rajani managed to cut the bonds with his

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., pp. 8–9.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>75</sup> Deposition of Prasanna at Munshiganj, and evidence of Jogmaya and Sashimukhi, ibid., pp. 19, 37, 50.

<sup>76</sup> Evidence of Tona and Mohim Sarkar, ibid., pp. 30–1, 65.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

teeth (lack of physical strength was clearly not the problem for this sixty-five-year-old), but then went off for some more paramarsha. Cross-examination revealed that the Srinagar police station was only a quarter of a mile from Rajani's house.<sup>78</sup>

•The women who testified at Dacca, in sharp contrast, conveyed a certain independence and dignity. Several resisted, and Jogmaya emphasized that 'we were unwillingly and by force taken by Lalmohan' to be stripped.<sup>79</sup> It was Jogmaya and her mother Sashimukhi who eventually went to Mahim Sarkar's house and persuaded him to come with a rescue party: the decisive action which ended the night of terror came from the initiative of women. Sashimukhi and Jogmaya made it clear that they had not liked or respected the sadhu even before that afternoon.<sup>80</sup> Sometimes a strong note of half-suppressed anger at the behaviour of their menfolk came out from the testimonies of the women. Sashimukhi stated that 'her husband did not turn up in time to save her from the whims of the ruffians.'<sup>81</sup> Rajlakshmi made it amply clear that her husband Lalmohan had done nothing to save her, had in fact actively helped Prasanna and actually laughed when she had appealed for help. Yet he did protest, she recalled with evident bitterness, when Prasanna hit her mother-in-law a couple of times; he also rejected Prasanna's suggestion that his son Nanda be sacrificed. Earlier, when Lalmohan had refused to treat her for fever and insisted that she seek help from the sadhu, Rajlakshmi had complained: 'What kind of game is this—please give me some medicine, otherwise I will tell my *debar*' (husband's younger brother).<sup>82</sup> There are hints here of a fairly typical joint-family syndrome where the married son retains much greater concern for his mother and develops a strong interest in the male heir, but the wife remains somewhat of an outsider, a borrowed womb, important as child-bearer and household drudge but not for herself.<sup>83</sup>

Tona, Jogmaya, Sashimukhi and Barada recounted in detail the

<sup>78</sup> Evidence of Rajani Majumdar, *ibid.*, pp. 55–8.

<sup>79</sup> *Bengalee*, 16 March 1905. Jogmaya was quite explicit about the role of Lalmohan in the version printed in the Calcutta newspaper: 'Both Lalmohan and Prasanna took away our clothes.'

<sup>80</sup> *KM*, pp. 33–8, 49–53; *Bengalee*, 16 and 17 March 1905.

<sup>81</sup> *Bengalee*, 17 March 1905.

<sup>82</sup> Evidence of Rajlakshmi Debi, at Srinagar and at Dacca, *KM*, pp. 21, 49.

<sup>83</sup> The wife could develop more affectionate relations, however, with her younger brother-in-law. Rajlakshmi's *debar* Brojendar, on that night, did try to rescue Nanda when Prasanna was threatening to kill him. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

kicking of Lalmohan by his wife.<sup>84</sup> The husband did not mention it, and Rajlakshmi's otherwise very detailed account of her sufferings also maintained an interesting silence here. Kicking the seated Lalmohan on the forehead represented an exact inversion of the pranam, the normal ritual gesture of deference. Does Rajlakshmi's failure to mention this incident among the indignities she had suffered that night indicate that she may not have been entirely unwilling, just at that moment?

The two upper-castes and the Chandal accused also presented a study in contrast at court. Lalmohan, by the end of the Dacca proceedings, had become a totally abject figure: 'I am innocent, I did nothing, I had become like something inert then . . . Please forgive me.'<sup>85</sup> Kalachand, in his first deposition at Srinagar, made a desperate attempt to pass the entire blame on to Prasanna, claiming, against all the evidence, that both Lalmohan and he himself had become 'half-dead with shame and fear', and had been mere helpless observers of the disrobing of women. Subsequently, at Munshigunj and in the Dacca court, the sadhu retreated into an enigmatic eccentricity, real or feigned. Once a schoolteacher, he now claimed to have forgotten how to write, and so refused to sign the *vakalatnama* needed for him to have a lawyer. He kept on repeating: 'I am *nirguna*, there is no *guna* in me. I live by begging.'<sup>86</sup> The pun might just possibly indicate an acquaintance with a famous passage in Bharatchandra's *Annadamangal*, where Parvati describes Siva through a similar double entendre—but otherwise contributed nothing to the proceedings.

Prasanna remained defiant till the end. 'We have been amazed', the *KM* commented, 'by his demon-like [*danabochita*] behaviour and words . . . in the open court that day this Chandal's son kicked a guard and threw him on to the ground.' He made no attempt at all to shift the blame on to the others, and even declared in his last statement in Dacca: 'I do not want to say anything more. I did everything alone.'<sup>87</sup> The *Bengalee* noted with surprise that 'Prasanna appears quite unconcerned with what is going around, commenting freely and gaily on the depositions of several witnesses.'<sup>88</sup> His com-

<sup>84</sup> *KM*, pp. 29, 37, 44, 53.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7, 14, 74.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 73.

<sup>88</sup> *Bengalee*, 17 March 1905.

ment about Lalmohan's final plea for innocence is worth recording: 'No, he did nothing, he just had three or four *kalkis* of *ganja* with us.'<sup>89</sup> The sense of liberation brought to the Chandal through faith in Kalachand and impending *yugapralay* persisted even in court: he seems to have looked upon the trial as an opportunity for sarcastic comments about his social superiors. Such sarcasm and gaiety is reminiscent almost of the well-known genre of gallow-speeches in eighteenth-century England and France, through which the condemned occasionally turned the spectacle of royal punitive authority into its opposite, giving it an 'aspect of the carnival, in which rules were inverted, authority mocked and criminals transformed into heroes'.<sup>90</sup> What would have been missing in the urban bhadralok-dominated Dacca courtroom, however, was the ambivalent plebeian audience, scandalized, terrified, and yet fascinated by the criminal-hero.

The Dacca jury consisted of three schoolteachers, a college lecturer and a local zamindar.<sup>91</sup> A village doctor of a gentry family would be someone like themselves, though considerably less successful. Kalachand, for witnesses and jury alike, would be a marginal figure: a Brahmin ex-schoolteacher but distanced by *ganja* and low-caste associates, with sadhu claims discredited now by the violence and horror of 23 Agrahayan. Prasanna, for everyone in court, was bound to remain totally alien, a figure of crude, plebeian violence, unmitigated by any signs of repentance. Alone of the three accused, he also went without any legal defence.<sup>92</sup> Predictably, perhaps, despite ample evidence of complicity or worse, the bhadralok jury acquitted Lalmohan, by majority decision, of all charges. Kalachand was found guilty of abetting 'homicide' and 'affront to feminine modesty', but not of committing either; he was acquitted of the other charge of arson. Prasanna was unanimously condemned for 'culpable homicide' (not murder), affront to feminine modesty, and

<sup>89</sup> KM, p. 74.

<sup>90</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (Paris, 1975; Peregrine, 1979), pp. 61, 57–69. See also Peter Linebaugh, *The Tyburn Riot Against the Surgeons*, in Hay, et al., *Albion's Fatal Tree* (Penguin, 1977).

<sup>91</sup> KM, pp. 1–2.

<sup>92</sup> Lalmohan had a lawyer to defend him. Kalachand's relatives brought several legal aides; despite his refusal to sign the *vakalatnama*, the British judge (Nicholls) permitted them to exercise an informal watchdog brief as 'friends of the court'. *Bengalee*, 14 March 1905.

arson (sections 304, 354 and 436 of the Criminal Procedure Code).<sup>93</sup> Sustaining the murder charge against Prasanna would probably have made the acquittal of Lalmohan more difficult.

Dissatisfaction with the relatively mild jury recommendations—‘the judicial wisdom of which many have not been able to admire’—led the *Dacca Prakash* to collate its earlier reports into the *KM* pamphlet.<sup>94</sup> The motivation here was clearly a ‘reformist’ exposure of religious corruption and superstition: ‘We shall be happy if the eyes of even one person are opened . . . The inhabitants of Bikrampur, so proud of their education, are very satisfied with themselves’, but

they have colluded so long with the horrible things being done by such religious imposters (*dharma-dhwajigana*) . . . We feel that the stream of immorality (*byabhischara*) which has been trickling so long through the heart of Bikrampur has now acquired the terrible form of the *Kalki-avatar*.<sup>95</sup>

Dacca town, along with the gentry of adjoining Bikrampur, had been a major centre of Brahmoism, and in 1877 Hunter had cited the *Dacca Prakash* as representing the ‘views of the educated natives generally’.<sup>96</sup> Social reform by 1905 had lost much of its centrality for the bhadralok, but something of the old zeal clearly remained.

Excitement had run high when the Doyhata case began before the Dacca sessions court:

The Court room and the adjoining streets were crowded with spectators. The whole town seemed to be in a state of excitement. No schoolboy was permitted to enter the court-room. The crowd sometimes was so great that the District Judge himself had to go out and clear the veranda. . .

and: ‘Such crowds have been seen rarely before in the court . . . The whole town seemed agog to see the strange trio (*apurba jivatroi*) and learn their fate.’<sup>97</sup>

<sup>93</sup> *KM*, p. 74; *Bengalee*, 19 March 1905.

<sup>94</sup> *KM*, p. 74.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>96</sup> Brahmos numbered about a thousand in Dacca according to Hunter, ‘comprising nearly all the English-speaking Hindus’ of that district. There had been only one cultivating-class Brahmo, however, and he had gone mad. (Hunter, pp. 117, 158). The extreme narrowness of the bhadralok world is indicated by the circulation figures of *Dacca Prakash*: 300 by Hunter’s account, 500 according to the official estimates in *Report on Native Papers (Bengal)*, January 1905.

<sup>97</sup> *Bengalee*, 17 March 1905; *KM*, p. 4.

Initially, then, Doyhata seemed well on the way towards becoming a major scandal. It was certainly sensational, and it could serve as a target for 'reformist' exposure. Yet the Calcutta papers failed to take it up in a big way. The *Bengalee* of Surendranath Banerjea, the mildly reformist mouthpiece of the Moderate Congress, gave fairly detailed coverage to the Dacca court hearings but no front-page or editorial space. Sisirkumar and Motilal Ghosh's *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, rival of Surendranath's paper since the 1870s and somewhat more militant and socially orthodox in its nationalism, allowed only one brief paragraph for the case and said nothing about women being stripped: 'The case is nasty from beginning to end, and we withhold further details.'<sup>98</sup> It subsequently published without comment the Calcutta appellate judgment on Doyhata as part of its regular court news section.

An interesting feature of the representation of Doyhata in the Calcutta press was an attempt to attribute responsibility primarily to the women: 'It seems the women of the family had great faith in the sadhu Kalachand and implored him to save the girl' (Sailo). 'The Sadhu was telling the women of the house that the end of the world was come and unless they implicitly followed him and his followers there would be no chance of his saving them from destruction.'<sup>99</sup> Such attribution of a special credulity to the Majumdar women, however, was clearly not borne out by the Dacca evidence as presented in *KM* or even in the *Bengalee*, and the point was not pressed further. Silence soon descended on the Doyhata affair.

The Calcutta bhadralok press was not always so reticent about scandals involving sex, murder and corrupt religious figures. The Tarakeswar case of 1873, for instance, which like Doyhata had all these three ingredients, had remained a *cause celebre* for years.<sup>100</sup> Why, then, did Doyhata fail to make the grade? That social reform had lost its centrality is not too convincing as an answer: the exposure of abuses remained important also from points of view conventionally labelled 'Hindu-revivalist' or 'patriotic'. One explanation could be that for the Calcutta—as distinct from the Dacca or Bikrampur—public, the Doyhata Kalki-avatar was too distant and insignificant a figure to require 'exposure'—unlike, say, the

<sup>98</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 15 March 1905.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 15 March 1905; *Bengalee*, 14 March 1905.

<sup>100</sup> Sripantha, *Mohunt-Elokesi Sangbad* (Calcutta, 1984), pp. 71–2, lists no less than thirty-four plays about this scandal.

*Tarakeswar mohanta*. But we can speculate about deeper reasons, and these lead on to the heart of our subject.

A scandal that gets talked about always involves transgressions—but transgressions which are not *too* uncomfortable, which remain within limits set by the dominant discourse. Doyhata seems to have gone beyond these limits in a number of ways, and, unlike many scandals, it proved impossible to derive any moral message from it. The Majumdar menfolk had cut very sorry figures indeed in the Doyhata case. They had allowed the Chandal to rage unchecked for a whole evening and night, even though the Srinagar police station was less than a mile away. Lalmohan—and possibly also Tona—had actually handed over the women of the household to be stripped. A cult of physical strength and courage had been developing for some years among Bengali bhadralok youth: publicity for Doyhata could certainly tarnish that self-image of male prowess.<sup>101</sup>

The attribution of a special superstition to the Majumdar women, attempted briefly by the two Calcutta dailies, may not necessarily have been a deliberate effort to pass responsibility. This, after all, was one of the standard stereotypes about women: they are often assumed to be exceptionally devout or credulous, depending on the point of view. Cults originally plebeian might gain social respectability through the conversion of upper-caste women as happens, for instance, in the medieval Manasa-Mangal. Women, in other words, are supposed to have a liminal relationship *vis-à-vis* the dark, ambiguous, fearful, yet fascinating underworld of society and religion. Once again, however, Doyhata refused to fit in, for here it was the men who were more credulous and the women much more hard-headed. ‘None of us wanted to strip . . . I did not respect the sadhu, I don’t know whether anyone else did so.’<sup>102</sup> Again, though the *KM* pamphlet in its preface related Doyhata to the preponderance of ‘ghor Koli’ (the depths of Koli-yuga), actually neither of the standard figures of women of nineteenth-century Koli-yuga literature were quite appropriate for the case.<sup>103</sup> Rajlakshmi, forced to

<sup>101</sup> Physical culture centres (*akharas*) were being set up in many places, and Sarala Debi in 1902 had started a Birastami *vrata*. Sumit Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–8* (New Delhi, 1973), pp. 394; 397; 470; J. Rosselli, ‘The Self-Image of Effateness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal, Past and Present’, no. 86, Feb., 1980.

<sup>102</sup> Evidence of Barada and Jogmaya, *KM*, pp. 38, 41.

<sup>103</sup> ‘We would have found it difficult to imagine such things happening even in these times of complete domination of *ghor Koli*.’ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

kick her husband by Prasanna, and just possibly doing it half-willingly, was hardly the disorderly woman-on-top, while the self-sacrificing, assertive yet deferential mother or wife was also conspicuously absent. The Majumdar women, sceptical of the sadhu and expressing in open court their resentments at the behaviour of their menfolk, could not be caught in the net of any of these male constructions of gender. Even salaciousness lost its bite in such a situation.

The nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century bhadralok male self-images concerning relations with women and social subordinates comprised a whole range of attitudes: paternalist head of the family, social reformer spreading enlightenment and trying to uplift the status of women (and, less often, lower castes), 'orthodox' or 'revivalist' religious mentor, philanthropist benefactor of the *daridra-narayan*, patriot inspiring 'his' people. What all these images had in common was an implicit retention of initiative. In Doyhata, however, a cult started by a poor Brahmin wanderer among lower castes, which seemed on the point of gaining a respectable bhadralok audience, had been suddenly hijacked by a Chandal. The normal distance between bhadralok and Chandal, reduced initially at the initiative of the sadhu in a quite acceptable manner (for Chaitanya, too, had had untouchable disciples), had been not only eliminated but fundamentally reversed, with Prasanna imposing his own meanings, levelling and burning-down distinctions of caste, class and gender.<sup>104</sup> It was this fundamental reversal of initiatives, perhaps, that made Doyhata a subject too uncomfortable to be talked about.

The British judge disagreed with the verdict of the Dacca jury, and the consequent appeal to the Calcutta high court enables a glance at yet another set of representations of the events of 23 Agrahayan. Pargiter and Woodhoffe's judgment of 28 June 1905 attributed no special superstition to women. Their summary of the evidence did not even mention Sailo's illness, and presented the women as helpless victims of 'various forms of ill-treatment, the details of which being of an obscene character, it is unnecessary to repeat here.' In sharp contrast to the bhadralok jury, there was a total lack of sympathy for the 'small unqualified medical practitioner,' Lalmohan and 'the Brahmin sadhu'. The latter was considered 'greatly responsible

<sup>104</sup> For a fuller discussion of the possible meanings of Prasanna's action that night, see below, section v.

for what occurred . . . owing to his position and the influence he possessed over his disciples . . . [he] could have, but did not, exercise any control over them . . .'. Prasanna, however, got a certain amount of paternalist sympathy—'the whole blame is sought to be laid on Prasanna, a low-caste man, who is undefended.'<sup>105</sup> Not too much sympathy, though, for this Chandal hardly fitted the British stereotype of 'patient and hardworking . . . a peaceful and exemplary subject of the English Government.'<sup>106</sup> And so Prasanna and Kalachand were given identical life sentences while Lalmohan, acquitted by the Dacca jury, now got ten years' rigorous imprisonment.

British judicial discourse was interested primarily in classification, drawing clear dividing lines, calculating precise degrees of guilt, and, in particular, establishing whether the accused were sane, legally responsible individuals or madmen—whether their appropriate destination should be the prison or the asylum. The decision was that exemption from liability under section 94 of the penal code was not possible: there could have been

some momentary mental derangement and religious delusions owing probably . . . to their being Ganja smokers. There is no evidence, however, that the Ganja had caused actual mental disease . . . We cannot therefore say that the accused did not by reason of unsoundness of mind know the nature of the acts which they did . . .

The discussion about madness arose in the context of the insanity plea put forward by the lawyers acting for Kalachand. It is legitimate to suspect some legal tutoring behind the assertion by the sadhu's relatives that they had tried to chain him up as a madman for breaking caste food rules and beating his wife and children. The first is not usually considered lunacy, and is often permissible for a sanyasi; the second, unfortunately, is common and 'normal' enough. The suspicion is strengthened by the shift in Kalachand's behaviour—from the collected and 'rational' effort to pass the blame on to Prasanna at Srinagar, to enigmatic irrelevancies at Munsigunj and Dacca. The strange claim by an ex-schoolteacher that he could not sign the vakalatnama did not harm Kalachand, for his lawyers remained in court; it could, however, have strengthened the insanity plea.

<sup>105</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 29 June 1905.

<sup>106</sup> Risley's comment in 1891, see above, n. 26.

Madness as a permanent or long-term total condition, the mad entirely distinct from the sane or normal, subject to medical authority, preferably locked up in an asylum—the presuppositions of British Indian law, as well as the unsuccessful efforts by some Indian lawyers to make use of them, form part of modern ‘common sense’. Yet, as Foucault has warned, madness too has history, and the culture of Bengal contains ample evidence about quite different perceptions of the *pagal*: not someone to be confined, but a free wanderer, whose discourse could at times contain intimations of higher truths and values. We have indications of a world where, as in Europe prior to the ‘great confinement’ of the seventeenth century, ‘the sensibility of madness was linked to the presence of imaginary transcendences.’<sup>107</sup> Perhaps the range of meanings in Indian traditions is even more multilayered than in pre-modern Europe. ‘Pagal’ often conveys not a sense of alienness and fear, but affection as well as reverence: one can become pagal for love—human or more often divine (as in many of Meera’s *bhajans*, or in *baul* songs)—for knowledge, or, by the early twentieth century, out of self-sacrificing devotion to one’s country. A wandering religious enthusiast like Kalachand could well be called pagal in this sense, with a connotation very different from the modern concept of madness. The nineteenth-century literature around the Koli-yuga and Kalki-avatar themes, we shall see, often includes such figures. The Doyhata evidence gives few indications that the Majumdar household had felt that they were confronting certifiable madmen in Kalachand, Prasanna or Lalmohan. There are signs, however, that one or two of Lalmohan’s relatives and friends—like Kalachand’s family—tried to utilize the ambiguities of the term *pagal* to help the accused.<sup>108</sup> *Pagal*, after all, in one of its many nuances, *could* mean—at least by 1905, perhaps much earlier—something similar to the concept of madness in the modern West.

The high court summary of evidence remained silent about the religious presuppositions of the Doyhata accused, apart from a single passing reference to Kalki-avatar claims. There was no attempt, in other words, Christian missionary-style, to classify the case as an instance of rank Hindu superstition, nor were there efforts to use

<sup>107</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (Paris, 1961; London, 1967), p. 58 and *passim*.

<sup>108</sup> Rajlakshmi Debi and Mahim Sarkar occasionally used the term *pagal* in connection with Lalmohan. *KM*, pp. 22, 47, 66.

the affair to discredit the bhadralok. Doyhata, in fact, did not enter British official discourse. Perhaps the judges wanted to avoid giving any impression of interference with religion. Political tempers were already rising in the context of plans for partitioning Bengal, and Tilak in Maharashtra had recently revealed the possibilities of a combination between aggressive Hinduism and patriotic fervour. It may have seemed wiser to attribute the 'religious delusions' of the accused entirely to an external physical agent, ganja, rather than to 'superstitious' beliefs.

Ganja can certainly produce delusions, but the precise forms of the latter would tend to be culturally constructed. We cannot, therefore, dismiss the religious dimensions of Doyhata as easily as did the British judges, nor should we—on the basis of court evidence coloured by hindsight coming from what happened on 23 Agrahayan—underestimate the possible initial faith in Kalachand's claims as miraculous healer of illness or Kalki-avatar. Traces of that faith, in fact, persist even in the evidence. Lalmohan recalled at Munshigunj: 'My *gurudeva* had come to my house. I was then in a state of supreme happiness.'<sup>109</sup> Several witnesses described Lalmohan's ecstasy on the night of 23 Agrahayan: 'Lakshminarayan has come to our house, the women must all take off their clothes' . . . 'None of you recognized him, but I have attained my *thakur*, the *yugapralay* has begun.'<sup>110</sup> The general mood of compliance, Tona's unexplained acquiescence, the remarkable timidity of Rajani—all these make a little more sense, given a certain belief in, or at least ambivalence towards, Kalachand's miracle-working and Kalki-avatar claims. Prasanna, at least, never seems to have lost faith. He invariably referred to his guru or gossain with respect, which contrasted sharply with his usual sarcasm and abuse. Nor did he express any regret whatsoever for the killing of Ananda: no doubt it still represented for him the ritual slaying necessary for the coming of the new yuga and/or for the manifestation of the sadhu in his true form.

*Yuga-pralay*, Kalki-avatar, and the other epic or *pauranic* terms used by or implicit in the actions of the Doyhata accused, therefore have to be taken seriously. This is so particularly because these have deep roots and had considerable contemporary resonance in Bengal around the turn of the century.

<sup>109</sup> *KM*, p. 14.

<sup>110</sup> Evidence of Prasanna, at Srinagar and of Barada Devi at Dacca, *ibid.*, pp. 8, 40.

## IV

The related themes of Koli-yuga and Kalki-avatar go back to the Mahabharata. In the third, Vana-Parva, volume of that epic (sections 187–190 of the *Markandeya-Samasya*), the sage Markandeya tells Yudishthira that the Satya or Krita, Treta, and Dwapar yugas will be followed by a Koli-yuga of a thousand years, when ‘the low will become the high, and the course of things will look contrary.’ The order of the world of nature will be upset, kings—many of them *mlecchas*—will turn terrible oppressors, avarice and lust will reign supreme, and Brahmins will become corrupt and have ‘their understanding clouded by the science of disputation.’ The text repeatedly associates Shudras with women as the two sources of disorder. Shudras ‘will expound the scriptures’ and ‘cease to wait upon and serve the Brahmins’, and they will have Brahmins to serve them. Girls will choose their own partners, wives will disobey and deceive their husbands and have intercourse with menials, slaves, and even animals. Thus, ‘all men . . . will become members of one common order, without distinction of any kind.’

At the end of Koli-yuga, the world will be destroyed by a terrible fire coming from ‘seven blazing suns’, followed by a universal flood. Then, in a famous and eerie tale, Markandeya will meet a boy playing under a tree in the midst of the endless ocean. He will find the whole universe again inside the mouth of this boy, who is Narayana or Vishnu—and so, with the Satya-yuga restored, with the upper castes purified and back at the top, Shudras again ‘devoted to the service of the three [higher] orders’, another identical cosmic cycle will begin.

In a brief coda, attached a bit loosely to this detailed account of Koli-yuga and world-destruction, Markandeya offers an alternative version. He refers to the birth in a Sambhalgram Brahmin family, of Kalki, who ‘will glorify Vishnu’, exterminate all *mleccha* rulers, become ‘the king of kings’, and, by giving the earth to the Brahmins at a great Aswamedha Yajna, properly inaugurate the new yuga.<sup>111</sup>

The account of Koli-yuga is elaborated in a number of later Sans-

<sup>111</sup> As I have no Sanskrit, I am using an English prose translation of the Mahabharata by Pratap Chandra Roy (Calcutta, n.d.), volume III, pp. 397–413. I have also consulted the most detailed and authoritative nineteenth-century Bengali translation, that by Kaliprasanna Sinha, Gopal Halder, et al., ed., *Mahabharata* (Calcutta, 1974), volume II, pp. 194–200.

krit texts, as for instance the *Vishnudharma* and *Brhannaradiya Upapuranas*, ascribed to the third and eighth centuries AD, respectively. The challenge from Shudras and women is often conflated now with Buddhist, Tantric and Lokayata tendencies.<sup>112</sup> The theme cropped up in vernacular literature too: Tulsidas, for instance, talks of Shudras reading the Gita while pandits suffer, whores flourishing while the *sati* (chaste women) starve: 'The *tamasha* of *Koli-kal* is wonderful, one has to weep and laugh at the same time.'<sup>113</sup>

The *Kalki-purana*, a very late Sanskrit text, composed perhaps as recently as in the eighteenth century and possibly originating in Bengal, renders the myth much more concrete by giving it local habitations and names.<sup>114</sup> Koli-yuga is embodied now in the rule of king Koli of 'Bishasanpur', whose lineage, personality and reign signify a wide range of sexual transgressions, all bracketed together as more-or-less equally heinous: incest, masturbation, bestiality, couples mating by free choice and disregarding caste rules, wives behaving like whores and dominating their menfolk.<sup>115</sup> Kalki, the avatar of Vishnu, has his Sambhalgram setting carefully described now;<sup>116</sup> he is trained in the Vedas and archery, receives a white horse and sword from Siva, marries Padma (the incarnation of Lakshmi), and defeats in battle the Buddhists of Kikatpur and then Koli, whose

<sup>112</sup> 'The heretics, decrying the system of the four stages of life, will create delusions . . . by means of the power of argumentation . . .' (*Vishnudharma*, chapter 105). 'Shudras bearing the signs of mendicancy will instruct dharma to dwija' (*Brhannaradiya*, chapter 38). There are many references to 'Pasandas' worshipping the *linga*. R. C. Hazra, *Studies in the Upapuranas, Volume I* (Calcutta, 1958), pp. 140, 324–5, 332–5. See also R. S. Sharma, *The Kali Age: A Period of Social Crisis*, in S. N. Mukherjee, ed., *India: History and Thought—Essays in Honour of A. L. Basham* (Calcutta, 1982).

<sup>113</sup> Quoted in Jayanta Goswami, *Samajchitre Unabinghsha Satabdir Bangla Prahasan* (Calcutta, 1974), pp. 194–5.

<sup>114</sup> ' . . . almost all its manuscripts, hitherto discovered, are written in Bengali script.' Hazra, p. 308.

<sup>115</sup> Thus Koli's descent is traced through a succession of brother-sister unions, and he himself mates with his sister Durukti and sits holding his penis with his left hand. In Bishasanpur, 'the mutual choice by man and women is sufficient for marriage . . . wives behave like whores . . . whoever lives there is under the command of women.' The two interesting omissions seem to be homosexuality and lesbianism. *Kalki-purana*, translated into Bengali by Kaliprasanna Vidyaratna (Calcutta, 1899; 10th ed., 1982), pp. 8, 10–11, 173.

<sup>116</sup> Kalki's parents are Vishnuyasha and Sumati; he has three brothers—Kabi, Prajnya and Sumantu. The Brahmin family is befriended by a king named Bishakhayupa.

city is destroyed by fire. The views described as Buddhist often recall those normally ascribed more to Carvaka: *pratyaksha* (sense-perceptions) as the sole source of valid knowledge, a consequent *deha-vada* (rejection of any *atma* or soul apart from the body), denial of caste, gods, and any life after death. Women soldiers are prominent in the Kikatpur army, and Koli is helped by mlecchas and 'Chandals'—while in the Satya-yuga as restored by Kalki Shudras will serve the *dwijas* and recite Hari-nama, and women will be 'devoted to husbands and faithful to dharma'.<sup>117</sup> The text is obviously Vaishnava, but in a manner very different from *bhakti* traditions, for it emphasizes both rigorous caste hierarchies and, quite explicitly, the need for Brahminical rituals, not bhakti or Hari-nama alone.

For almost two thousand years, then, the myth of Koli-yuga and Kalki-avatara has been a recurrent and powerful vision, reminiscent in some ways of its Christian counterparts, from the Book of Revelation onwards, of the world turned upside down, and of a variety of millennialian dreams. There are, however, two cardinal differences. Time here is predominantly cyclical, not linear;<sup>118</sup> at the most fundamental level there is no innovation, order is endlessly disrupted and then restored, epoch after epoch, and the return is not on any higher plane. The ideal is hierarchical order— emphatically not the lost equality and freedom which inspired so many plebeian heresies and rebellions in medieval and early modern Europe. But both visions have provided forms and legitimacy to a variety of social anxieties and aspirations. What is relevant for us here is their specific forms in nineteenth-century Bengal.

As in early modern Europe, the development of print-culture in colonial India broadened the potential audience and appeal of religious literature of a predominantly 'traditionalist' type.<sup>119</sup> The pub-

<sup>117</sup> *Kalki-purana*, pp. 113–17, 126, 173, 233 and *passim*.

<sup>118</sup> Cyclical conceptions of time do not, however, necessarily rule out linearity: in this case, there is a linear progression from Satya through Treta and Dwapar to Koli-yuga. The two can co-exist within the same cognitive system, but generally not on an equal footing. See L. Howe, 'The Social Determination of Knowledge: Maurice Bloch and Balinese Time', *Man*; 16, II, 1981, and Nancy M. Farriss, 'Remembering the Future, Anticipating the Past: History, Time and Cosmology Among the Maya of Yucutan', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29, III; July 1987.

<sup>119</sup> Forty-five per cent of the books printed in Europe before 1500 were religious works, and the latter comprised 105 out of 198 titles printed in Paris in 1515.

lication of classical Sanskrit texts and their translations, started by Western Orientalists and indigenous reformers like Rammohun, was quickly taken up also by 'orthodox' groups like the Bharatvarshiya Sanatan Dharmarakshini Sabha or the newspaper *Bangabasi*.<sup>120</sup> Editions of the Sanskrit text of the *Kalki-purana* came out in 1873 and 1890. Bengali translations included those by Sureshchandra Samajpati in 1886, Kaliprasanna Vidyaratna in 1899 (which I am using), and Panchanan Tarkaratna in 1908.<sup>121</sup> Its continued popularity is indicated by the publication in 1962 of the tenth edition of Kaliprasanna Vidyaratna's version. Meanwhile the traditional oral media for propagation of religious and moral values like *jatras*, *panchalis* and *kathakatas* remained as important as ever.<sup>122</sup>

The recurrent motifs of the Koli-yuga myth—mleccha rulers, corruption among the twice-born, insubordinate Shudras, disorderly 'women on top', corrosion of faith by rationalistic critiques—could obviously provide a convenient format for certain types of responses to developments in nineteenth-century Bengal. It is equally evident that the myth would attract some social groups more than others. The world of bhadralok high culture—the so-called Bengal Renaissance—on the whole concerned itself little with Koli-yuga, except as an occasional catch-phrase with little deep meaning, or as a peg for some fairly mild, not-too-serious satire.<sup>123</sup> Social reformers were unlikely to be attracted by a myth which flayed dwija corruption only to exalt caste hierarchy and strict subordination of

Printing, it has been argued, 'could not be said to have hastened the acceptance of new ideas and knowledge in any unqualified sense.' Lucian Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450–1800* (London, 1976), pp. 249, 264, 278.

<sup>120</sup> Thus the inaugural meeting of the Bharatvarshiya Sanatan Dharmarakshini Sabha in Calcutta in 1868, patronized by big zamindars like Maharaja Sir Digvijay Singh and Digambar Mitra, announced as one of its main objectives the translation of religious texts into *Gauriya sadhubhasha* (chaste Bengali). *Report of Inaugural Meeting* (Calcutta, 1868), p. 2. The 'orthodox' *Bangabasi* set up a separate translation department for this purpose in 1886, under Panchanan Tarkaratna. Chintaharan Chakrabarti, *Bangla Sahitya Sabhay Sanskrita Pandit-samaj*, in *Sahitya-Sadhak-Charitmala*, vol. xi, no. 107 (Calcutta, 1971).

<sup>121</sup> Catalogue of Bengali Publications, National Library of India (no place, no date); R. C. Hazra, p. 303.

<sup>122</sup> See Haripada Chakrabarti, *Dasarathi o Tnahr Panchali* (Calcutta, 1960). chapter 1, for an useful account of such forms.

<sup>123</sup> Dwijendralal Roy, *Samaj-bibhrata o Kalki-avatar* (Calcutta, 1895), typifies this kind of non-serious handling of the myth.

women. Nor were groups conventionally labelled 'conservative' or 'orthodox' necessarily attached to it. The lurid, black-and-white contrasts of the *Kalki-purana*, with its vision of an abrupt and total change, did not fit in too well with the ameliorative and gradualist perspectives common on the whole to 'reformers' or 'conservatives' coming from established gentry or successful professional groups.<sup>124</sup>

The Koli-yuga theme leaps into prominence as soon as we try to explore the products of what is often generically described as 'Bat-tola', the Calcutta equivalent of Grub Street.<sup>125</sup> Jayanta Goswami's voluminous study of plays and farces lists 505 of them between 1858 and 1899. Among these no less than 31 have Koli in their titles, while the texts summarized by him contain many more references.<sup>126</sup> The authors, most of them forgotten today, are generally upper-caste, and quite often Brahmin. But clearly theirs is the world of the unsuccessful bhadralok—obscure hack-writers, clerks, humble schoolteachers, pandits losing patronage in the new era, very different from the elite families or upwardly-mobile, highly-educated 'middle-class' gentlemen of the Brahmo Samaj, Indian Association, or Sanatan Dharmarakshini Sabha. Meanwhile similar themes were finding expression in the bazaar paintings of Kalighat: 'sold by thousands in stalls near the shrine of Kalighat in the neighbourhood of Calcutta as also in other places of pilgrimage and public fairs . . . at a price ranging from a pice to an anna.'<sup>127</sup> From about the 1870s onwards, a strongly satirical note becomes evident in the Kalighat paintings—'the world', the *patuas* seem to have felt, 'was passing through a dark age, a Koli yug.' Mildred Archer has described this as a mood of 'popular disgust with modern life'.<sup>128</sup>

The term 'popular' here probably requires some qualification.

<sup>124</sup> Thus the inaugural address of Chandrasekhar Mukhopadhyay to the Sanatan Dharmarakshini Sabha briefly referred to Koli-yuga to make the point that 'The sages in any case have prescribed rules appropriate for Koli-yuga, which should be obeyed.' The apocalyptic note embodied in the Kalki myth is conspicuously absent here.

<sup>125</sup> For a brief description of Bat-tola literature, see Sukumar Sen, *Banglar Chhapa o Boi* (Calcutta, 1984).

<sup>126</sup> Jayanta Goswami, pp. 1233–55.

<sup>127</sup> T. N. Mukherji, *Art Manufactures of India* (Calcutta, 1888), quoted in W. G. Archer, *Bazaar Paintings of Calcutta* (London, 1953), pp. 12–13.

<sup>128</sup> Mildred Archer, *Indian Popular Paintings in the India Office Library* (London, 1977), p. 143.

Bat-tola farces and Kalighat paintings no doubt satirized babu culture, but they do not offer any unmediated access to a distinct level of popular culture any more than, say, the *Bibliotheque bleu* or the chapbooks of seventeenth-eighteenth century France or England. Their patrons and consumers could include many of the bhadralok, while the strongly hierarchical values they embody would seem to suggest a culture imposed on rather than coming from the popular classes.<sup>129</sup> In so far as a specific strata can be distinguished at all—always a problematical venture in matters of culture—it would be rather the world of genteel poverty, depressed upper-caste literati within a kind of pre-industrial lower middle class.<sup>130</sup> Precisely, in fact, the kind of milieu from which our Bikrampur Kalki-avatar came; and it is surely not stretching historical imagination too far to think of jatras embodying Koli-yuga themes and Kalighat paintings reaching a religious fair like that of Nangalbandh, where Kalachand met Prasanna.

The bulk of the farces surveyed by Jayanta Goswami are set firmly in the present, earthly—as distinct from *pauranic* or cosmic—time. The evils of Koli-yuga, consequently, are far more prominent than the Kalki-avatar counterpoint, references to which are in fact rather rare. A principal target, as one would expect, was the Anglicized, often Brahmo, young man.<sup>131</sup> The vices of corrupt *purohits* and Vaishnava *goswamis* are attacked with equal vehemence, at times in the same play, a reminder that sharp ‘reformist’/‘orthodox’ disjunctions are often irrelevant.<sup>132</sup> But the central figure, at least

<sup>129</sup> For important discussions concerning problems with the concept of ‘popular culture’, see Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (Penguin, 1982), pp. xix–xx, and Roger Chartier, ‘Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France’, in Steven Kaplan, ed., *Understanding Popular Culture* (Mouton, 1984).

<sup>130</sup> A Czech historian has warned against the imputation of an unqualified ‘popular’ character to medieval European utopian or millenarian thinking. The ‘Land of Cockayne’, he argues, is ‘most likely to be found among the wandering scholars and students who were familiar with village life but also had a certain literary education’. F. F. Graus, ‘Social Utopias in the Middle Ages’, *Past and Present*, 38, December 1967.

<sup>131</sup> See, for example, Kanailal Sen, *Kolir Dashdasha* (Calcutta, 1875); Surendra-nath Haldar, *Kolir Sang* (Calcutta, 1880); and Mahendra Nath’s *Kolir Avatar*. Jayanta Goswami, pp. 404–8, 193–8, 893.

<sup>132</sup> Thus Kalikumar Mukhopadhyay’s *Bapre Koli* (Calcutta, 1886) has as its twin targets the Anglicized youth Ambicacharan, who tries to steal his elder brother’s wife, and the guru Mahesh Vidyachandchu, who plans to seduce a servant girl. Most

from the mid 1860s onwards, is undoubtedly the disorderly woman: the prostitute who gets priority over the wife, or, more often, the 'modern' wife herself, who ill-treats the mother-in-law, enslaves the husband, wastes money on luxuries for herself, and prefers reading novels to household duties.<sup>133</sup> The fears expressed through this recurrent figure seem too deep to be explained merely by the *stree-swadhinata* (women's emancipation) efforts—at their height in the 1860s and 1870s—of Vidyasagar, Keshav Sen or the Young Brahmos. Reformist discourse in fact always combined emancipation with insistence upon puritanical restraint, freedom with discipline, and in any case the impact of reform efforts on everyday gender relations was extremely limited.<sup>134</sup> Perhaps we have here, as in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, 'a displacing of change in general on to women in particular', with women bearing 'the brunt of a general social uneasiness'.<sup>135</sup>

The great unsaid of much of this literature, namely colonial subjection (it is significant that mleccha rule and oppression, very much part of the Koli-yuga myth, is hardly ever directly mentioned in these farces), in fact makes an unexpected and indirect entry precisely through the woman-on-top. In Harishchandra Bandopadhyay's *Kaler Bau* ((1880), for instance, the husband complains: 'We have no happiness, whether at home or outside. Slaves to government officials, we have to spend our time in home as slaves to the wives (*stree das*).') Subordination to wives gets conflated in an extremely interesting manner with political subjection to 'the sons of the English queen': 'Bangamata' has become the 'slave [*dasi*] of the

of the twenty-two farces on the Tarakeswar scandal of 1873 summarized in Goswami are bitterly critical of the *mohunt* Madhavgiri, *ibid.*, pp. 1134–7, 254–300.

<sup>133</sup> In Bhulanath Mukhopadhyay's *Bhyalare mor bap, arthat streebadhya prabasan* (Calcutta, 1876), to take only one example, the mother-in-law has to go around in tatters and is eventually thrown out, the wife (Bijoykali) spends all her husband's money on clothes for herself, the husband (Kalirkap) describes his wife as 'my master, my guru, my object of worship and devotion' and even drinks her *caranamrita*. The farce ends with Bijoykali dressing up Kalirkap in sheep's clothes. Exact iconographic equivalents exist in Kalighat paintings—a woman leads a sheep with a human head in a *pat* dated around 1865, and a woman boldly strides on top of a prostrate man. Mildred Archer, p. 147; W. Archer, plate 42, p. 70.

<sup>134</sup> For a brief discussion, see my 'Women's Question in Nineteenth Century Bengal', in *A Critique of Colonial India* (Calcutta, 1985).

<sup>135</sup> Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Sussex, 1983), pp. 49, 182.

London queen'. Thus the figure of the suffering mother neglected by sons who have been entrapped by the wiles of the modern wife becomes a metaphor for the enslaved 'mother'-land.<sup>136</sup> Political themes quickly overshadow misogynist satire in *Meye Parliament ba Bhagnitantraraj* (1886, 1893), a farcical counter-utopia where women rule and men sit behind the *parda*, deprived of equal rights since they are not yet fit for them: 'Licking the feet of their superiors has become [their] only occupation . . . slavery is their only source of livelihood . . . the entire nation [*jati*] has become a nation of supplicants [*umedar*].'<sup>137</sup>

The disorderly wife promotes the neglect of kinship obligations, and thus enhances the corrosive impact of the 'modern' craze for money. The theme of worship of money disrupting family ties is a recurrent one in the theatre of Girishchandra Ghosh, the one major literary figure of the nineteenth century who had roots in lower-middle-class urban life.<sup>138</sup> A related motif is the time-bound, and therefore unbearably rigorous, work characteristic of Koli-yuga—from which solace is sought in drink—as by the ruined old-fashioned businessman Jogesh in *Prafulla*—or in a religion of simple bhakti through the recitation of Hari-nama alone, the only kind appropriate for busy times.<sup>139</sup> The discourse of Ramakrishna, Girishchandra's guru—a poor rustic Brahmin who captivated a largely clerical bhadralok audience—becomes redolent of deeper layers of meaning in this context: for Ramakrishna, as is well known, repeatedly brought together the evils of *kamini*, *kanchan*, and the *dasatya* of *chakri* in offices.<sup>140</sup> *Natun Babu ba Kolir Abatar*

<sup>136</sup> Jayanta Goswami, p. 1036.

<sup>137</sup> Sri Kono Ek Aitibasik, *Meye Parliament ba Bhagnitantraraj* (Calcutta, 1886, 1893), pp. 180–2.

<sup>138</sup> See, for example, his *Srivatsa-Chinta* (1884) and *Prafulla* (1889) in Rathindranath Roy and Debipada Bhattacharji, ed., *Girish Rachanabali* (Calcutta, 1969), volumes iv, iii. Girish failed in his school-leaving examination, and worked as a clerk till the 1880s. He wrote for a public stage, and his theatre took over many elements of the popular jatra form. Utpal Dutt's *Girish-manas* (Calcutta, 1983) contains an interesting discussion of such themes, but greatly exaggerates the 'popular' and 'progressive' aspects of Girishchandra.

<sup>139</sup> *Srivatsa-Chinta*, i.ii; *Prafulla*, i.i; *Nasiram* (1888), i.iii, ii.iii; *Kalapahar* (1896), ii.i, iii.; *Girish Rachanabali*, volumes III, IV.

<sup>140</sup> For a preliminary discussion of these themes, which I no longer find entirely satisfactory, see Sumit Sarkar, 'The Kathamrita as Text: Towards an Understanding of Ramakrishna Paramhansa', Occasional Paper xxii, New Delhi, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 1985.

(1904), written by a minor playwright obviously influenced by Girishchandra, identified '*Kolir karkhana*'—the factory of Kali—with craze for money, selfish sundering of kinship ties, and contempt of the nouveau riche babu for relatives who have remained clerks.<sup>141</sup>

From around the 1880s onwards, counterpoints start developing to the evils of Koli-yuga, and once again the woman provides the central metaphor. The disorderly woman is partially displaced by the pure, suffering mother, wife, or even at times prostitute with heart of gold, ennobled by suffering and reasserting the moral order in ways that somehow combine boldness with deference. Prafulla, in Girish's play named after her, pious wife of the villainous Ramesh who has ruined his older brother Jogesh, provides a notable example of this genre. It is she who resists her husband, not Jogesh—who remains sunk in total passivity and drink—and yet she combines deference with resistance.<sup>142</sup> In Satischandra Chattopadhyay's *Annapurna* (1904), the wife insists on helping her ailing brother-in-law against the wishes of her husband Bhupen. A drunk Bhupen beats his wife, who responds characteristically: 'You have every right to beat me. But I am pleading at your feet . . . Do not get so excited . . . let me fan you a little.'<sup>143</sup> The nature and limits of this kind of deferential assertion are clearly spelt out in a slightly earlier play by the same author: 'We are women, our only intelligence is our husband's . . . but if at times the husband's thinking has gone astray [*vipareet buddhi*], the duty of the intelligent wife is to correct that, otherwise we disgrace our name as partners in *dharma* [*sahadharmini*].'<sup>144</sup> In both plays women relatives and neighbours

<sup>141</sup> Bilas, the 'natun babu', neglects his mother, refuses to help his brother, and is full of contempt for his old-fashioned father who had kept open house for poor relatives: 'They are worthless clerks! Poor! And I am now a well-known *baralok* . . . The *baralok* of today doesn't care for brothers and such-like!' Satischandra Chattopadhyay, *Natun Babu ba Kolir Abatar* (Calcutta, 1904), scenes xii and xiii.

<sup>142</sup> 'Do you think I care for my own life so much that I'll let my husband do such a devilish thing . . .? Dharma has tolerated a lot, take care, it will not permit this: . . . I will not criticize you—I pray that God will accept my death as atonement (*prayashchitta*) for your sins . . . my dying prayer is—God forgive you.' *Prafulla*, v.iv.

<sup>143</sup> *Annapurna*, III.vi.

<sup>144</sup> Satischandra Chattopadhyay, *Chandiram* (Calcutta, 1901), II.iv. The wife was protesting against her husband's plans to force their daughter Madhavi to marry the old king. In a happy ending, with changes of heart all around, Madhavi marries the young man of her choice, and then promptly falls at this feet: 'I am the servant (*dasi*)

are shocked by the boldness of the wives. What we have here is not a simple revival of the tradition of Sati-Savitri-Sita, but a new construction, different from yet related to the old.

The Koli-yuga literature we have been surveying is virtually silent about that other obsession of the earlier texts, the insubordinate Shudra. This is perhaps because there were few self-consciously anti-caste movements among plebeian groups in nineteenth-century Bengal.<sup>145</sup> There are, instead, occasional plebeian trickster-figures helping wronged wives to take revenge upon dissolute husbands,<sup>146</sup> as well as old-world servants in choric roles ridiculing their Anglicized masters and assisting, in properly subordinate ways, the restoration of the moral order.<sup>147</sup> Figures like Batul or Bhajahari in Girishchandra's *Srivatsa-Chinta* and *Prafulla* add an interesting dimension of plebeian comment. Peasants evicted and ruined by tax-collectors and zamindars, they put in perspective the less acute misery of their masters. But concern for plebeian misery is never allowed to overstep its limits to become sympathy for rebellion. Batul in fact actively helps in the restoration of king Srivatsa after he has been overthrown by a popular uprising. Poverty ceases to remain abstract or marginal only when it becomes a matter of clerks, or—as in many early-twentieth century Bengali novels about rural life—of the life of poor Brahmin families in villages.<sup>148</sup> For the rest, we have once again the figure of deferential assertion, for plebeians

protected by you.' The son also protests against his father, but within the same deferential mode. *Ibid.*, VI.

<sup>145</sup> Brahmo criticism of caste spent itself in surrogate actions like removing the sacred thread from *acharyas* presiding over Brahmo prayer meetings, and in any case remained a strictly bhadralok affair; inter-caste marriages seldom went beyond Brahmin-Vaidya-Kayastha. Nineteenth-century Bengal never produced a Jyotiba Phule.

<sup>146</sup> Ramnarayan Tarkaratna, *Chakshudan* (Calcutta, 1869); Jogendranath Bandyopadhyay, *Ami Tomari* (Calcutta, 1979); Mir Musaraff Husain, *Er Upay Ki?* (Calcutta, 1892). In Ramakrishna Chattopadhyay's *Chhere de Ma Knede Bnacchi* (Calcutta, 1881), two prostitutes sincerely devoted to their poor lovers turn the tables on a rich client: one rides on his back, the other spanks his behind. Jayanta Goswami, pp. 201–4, 208–11, 216–19. Girishchandra's plays sometimes have plebeian women trickster-figures who energetically carry forward the action—the reformed prostitute Sona in *Nasiram*, the Shudra Chanchala in *Kalapahar*.

<sup>147</sup> Sailendranath Haldar, *Kolir Sang* (Calcutta, 1880); Jasadanandan Chatto-padhyay, *Kolir Kap* (Calcutta, 1895). Jayanta Goswami, pp. 195, 233–9.

<sup>148</sup> A good example of this genre would be the sufferings of Harihar and Sarbajaya in Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's *Pather Panchali*.

as for women. Deference is pushed to its limits, all but transgressed, almost turned into its opposite, but eventually restored in a purified form.

In several of Girishchandra's plays the restoration of the moral order takes place under the aegis of wandering Brahmins who appear mad (*pagal*) to the conventional world but convey profound truths in an earthy language. Nasiram in the play named after him (1889), or Chintamani in *Kalapahar* (1896), are clearly modelled on one kind of representation of Ramakrishna: they preach the complete surrender of rationalistic calculation, the rejection of any social activism, and repeatedly condemn kamini, kanchan, and, the dasatya of chakri.<sup>149</sup> The *pagal* of Girishchandra brings together elements in Indian religious traditions (the baul, as well as bhajans where love for the divine becomes indistinguishable from 'madness') with the Shakespearian fool.<sup>150</sup> Satischandra Chattopadhyay, too, has his 'mad' religious wanderers—Chandiram, and, in *Annapurna*, Ramakrishna himself as Gadadhar, pujari in a rich man's temple, along with a *thakurda* (grandfather) who roams the streets happily singing devotional songs. The importance of this theme in contemporary culture might help to explain the ease with which Kalachand gained entry into the Majumdar household.

So far we have not encountered the Kalki myth at all. Its apocalyptic and martial mood did not fit in too well with the dominant motif of a restoration of moral order through a kind of passive resistance, and the plays we have surveyed are firmly set in earthly time. In 1888, however, a play was written about a rumour in Bengal that a golden tile had fallen from heaven on the Kasi Viswanath temple of Banaras, predicting that 'soon Vishnu will be born as avatar to punish the atheists (*nastik*).'<sup>151</sup> Ramakrishna was far from being a millenarian figure, yet the *Kathamrita* does contain one startling aside. Recalling insults suffered at the hands of a Dakshineswar temple official, he once remarked: 'The Kalki-avatar will

<sup>149</sup> *Nasiram*, II. iii; *Kalapahar*, I.v.

<sup>150</sup> In *Nasiram*, II. iii, the Kapalik explains to Sona why the king likes Nasiram: 'Kings like to keep such a *pagal* with them, to see what madness is'. He adds, however, 'Oh, that madman, don't you know how he cured the king of his illness once?' Elizabethan fools, in contrast, provide a commentary on the ways of the world—they seldom affect the course of the action in any fundamental way.

<sup>151</sup> R.N. Sarkar, *Kasidhame Visweswarer Mandire Swarga Hoite Sonar Tali Patane Kalki Avatar* (Calcutta, 1888), Jayanta Goswami, p. 1218 (Unfortunately no further details are given).

come at the end of Koli-yuga. A poor Brahmin's son, he will know nothing—suddenly a horse and sword will come . . .'.<sup>152</sup> The striking thing here is the identification of Kalki with a poor Brahmin—totally absent in the Mahabharata or the *Kalki-purana*—which surely tells us something about the social location of the myth in late-nineteenth-century Bengal.

There are, however, a few plays which unlike the rest try to combine mythical with historical time. Two of these, dated 1859 and 1902, explicitly base themselves on the *Kalki-purana*, and the gap in time between them affords some insights into the way the theme was being modified in late-nineteenth-century Bengal. Narayan Chattoraj's *Koli kautuk Natak* (Serampur, 1859) describes the various evils of Koli-yuga, but does not mention Kalki or any pagal saviour at all; nor are women—whether disorderly or deferentially assertive—particularly prominent. The play ranges in time from the reign of Parikshit down to 'Koli coming to Bengal, and setting up, through Clive sahib, the city of Koli-karta [where Koli is master] or Calcutta.' The agents of Koli are many: Buddhists, Muslims destroying temples (only a passing reference, however), Tantriks, plebeian groups like the Bauls and the Kartabhaja, lecherous orthodox pandits, Kulin polygamists, Anglicized young men, Rammohun, Vidyasagar. Special attention is given to materialist and hedonist arguments, which are expounded with such care that one is almost tempted to suspect some ambiguity in the author's own beliefs.<sup>153</sup>

An interesting study in contrast is offered by *Kolir Abashan, ba Kalki-abatarer Geetabhinoy* (Calcutta, 1902), written by a 'poor Brahman' from Jessore working as head pandit in a Calcutta school (Mitra Institution), and particularly important for us because it was made into a jatra and performed often in the mufassil.<sup>154</sup> 'Nastik'

<sup>152</sup> 'M', *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, volume iv (Calcutta, 1919, 1980), p. 101 (20 June 1889).

<sup>153</sup> Narayan Chattoraj, *Kolikautuk Natak Arthat nattyachhale Kolir arambha-abadhi bartaman kalparyyanta ghatanar sangkhipta bibaran* (Serampur, 1859), pp. 37–42. The arguments are put in the mouth of Buddha, but many of them are taken straight from descriptions of Carvaka's teachings in the *Vishnupurana* and Madhava's *Sarva-Darshan-Sangraha* (see Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, *Lokayata: A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism*, New Delhi, 1978, pp. 22, 41, 45). The ironic style is reminiscent also of Caryapada verses, and at times of Kabir, while the more immediate context might well be the rationalistic iconoclasm of 'Young Bengal'.

<sup>154</sup> Aghorchantra Kabyatirtha, *Kolir Abashan, ba Kalki-Abatar-Geetabhinoy* (Calcutta, 1902), Preface.

arguments remain important,<sup>155</sup> but an equally prominent feature of the reign of the incestuous Koli-Durukti couple is now the emancipated and therefore disorderly women.<sup>156</sup> The really striking innovation, however, is that Kalki is born in an abjectly poor village Brahmin household. His elder brother, Sumantu, almost dies of hunger, but is miraculously saved by 'Gobin-pagla', a typical figure of holy madness preaching the power of Hari-nama.<sup>157</sup> And the deferentially-assertive pure woman turns up again and again. Kalki's father Vishnuyasha, on the point of killing himself due to poverty, is given sustenance and faith by his wife Sumati, who asserts in the same breath that 'the chief dharma of women is to serve their husbands'.<sup>158</sup> In heaven, Saraswati quarrels with Lakshmi, for in Koli-yuga virtuous learning (embodied no doubt in the poor Brahmin) has been overcome by the fickle power of money.<sup>159</sup> A Brahmin widow, dragged by soldiers into the court of the justful Koli, heroically defends her chastity by killing herself. Though the play discreetly avoids any direct reference to mleccha rule as a feature of Koli-yuga, we are here trembling on the verge of a clear-cut patriotic statement.<sup>160</sup>

Biharilal Chattopadhyay's *Naba Raha ba Yuga-Mahatmya* (Calcutta, 1897) begins with the reign of Koli-raj and disorder in Siva's family, but quickly passes on to scenes of peasant poverty and plague. Significantly, a male young hero now appears to defend the honour of a village girl being pawed by an English doctor on the pretext of medical examination: 'I will knock down your head', he thunders in English, 'and examine your deranged brain wherein germinates the mania of Bubonic fever.'<sup>161</sup> We are entering the era of Vivekananda, Swadeshi young men, and revolutionary terrorism.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., pp. 11, 111–20, 205–7. They include the well-known saying attributed to Carvaka: 'As long as you live, live happily; borrow, if necessary, to have *ghi*.'

<sup>156</sup> At the beginning of his reign, Kali assures Durukti that women will be completely free (*swadhin*): 'In learning and wisdom/men will be defeated by women/men will remain in fear/at the feet of women, day and night/. . . the mother will be servant (dasi) to the daughter-in-law. . .'. Ibid., pp. 6–7.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., pp. 27–45.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., pp. 12–19.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., pp. 55–6.

<sup>161</sup> Jayanta Goswami, pp. 1140–2.

## V

By the turn of the century Koli-yuga and Kalki-avatar had thus come to signify a set of images, emotions and beliefs, an entire 'structure of feeling'.<sup>162</sup> Its apparently traditionalist idiom was open to, and able to incorporate, moments of self-assertion by women and a concern for poverty: more specifically, the anguish of pre-industrial 'lower middle class' groups—poor Brahmin literati in villages and small towns, schoolteachers, clerks. More detailed analysis of the implications of this pattern of assertion-within-deference lies beyond the scope of the present essay. But the figure we have been tracing does seem to offer a striking preview of many dimensions of Gandhian satyagraha, and the low-life of literature of Bengal in the 1920s would repeatedly return to it; merely spelling out explicitly its nationalist implications.<sup>163</sup> In its praxis, too, middle-class male nationalism would relate to subaltern groups in ways strikingly similar: peasants and women would be simultaneously mobilized and controlled through a strategy and language which modified, adjusted, but never fundamentally overturned the hierarchies and norms of deference of caste, class and gender. We encounter here, perhaps, a crucial affective component of a pattern of 'passive revolution'.<sup>164</sup> Analysis of this structure of feeling might help the critique of nationalism to get beyond the crudities of conspiracy or betrayal models. Deferential assertion could be internalized, to a considerable extent, among subordinate groups. It had its linkages, after all, with pre-existing patterns of bhakti. Meera's revolt against the norms of court life and patriarchy had found expression, it may

<sup>162</sup> Raymond Williams defines 'structure of feeling' as 'characteristic elements of impulse, restraint and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships.' He distinguishes this term from concepts like 'world-view' or 'ideology' because of the need to 'go beyond formally held and systematic beliefs', and out of a concern for 'meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt'. *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), p. 132.

<sup>163</sup> See in particular the analysis of the novel *Charka-Rani* in Tanika Sarkar, 'Nationalist Iconography . . .', *Economic and Political Weekly*, xxii, 47, 21 November 1987.

<sup>164</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (New York-London, 1971), pp. 106–14. For attempts to apply the 'passive revolution' concept to Indian nationalism, see Sumit Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership in Late Colonial India* (Calcutta, 1983), pp. 71–3, and Partha Chatterji, *Nationalism and Colonialism: A Derivative Discourse* (Delhi, 1987).

be recalled, in a passionate willed submission: '*Mein chakor rakho, chakor rakho, chakor rakho ji*'.<sup>165</sup>

How, if at all, does Doyhata relate to all this? The linkages remain inevitably obscure. We know nothing about the reading abilities and habits of the Majumdar household or of Kalachand, about the plays they or the illiterate Prasanna may have seen, the cheap pictures they might have brought back from temples or fairs. More specifically, we do not know whether Kalachand saw the jatra about the Kalki-avatar, then touring the mufassil, which had been written by another poor Brahmin schoolteacher. All that the case-record tells us is that bits and pieces, not only of the Kalki-avatar myth but of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, coloured and structured the happenings at Doyhata. Yuga-pralay, Yama, Dronacharya, Hanuman, Lanka, all somehow entered the story. They entered it in different ways, in and through a conflict over meanings—that is the important point—and the sum total, after Prasanna's take-over, became something which middle-class discourse could not absorb.

A curious mismatch is apparent in the evidence about the four central figures of 23 Agrahayan: Lalmohan, Kalachand, Prasanna and Ananda. We know, or can guess, a reasonable amount about the background of people like Lalmohan, or even Kalachand, but next to nothing about the everyday cultural life of Prasanna or Ananda. Yet Lalmohan and Kalachand remain more mysterious as individuals, for both in different ways tried to evade responsibility in court through reticence. Prasanna, in contrast, was evidently proud of most of the things he had done that night, and talked with apparent frankness. It is somewhat easier to tease possible meanings out of his actions, but very difficult to place them in a broader context.

Were the actions of the trio planned beforehand, as Prasanna claimed in court? The events stretched out over a fair length of time, from late afternoon or early evening to well past midnight. Lalmohan and Tona helped to throw away the corpse, no one seems to have objected seriously to the fires, no family member or neighbour tried to get help from the police-station a mere quarter-mile away. Absent from the bulk of the evidence, also, is any marked tone of surprise or dismay. It was only around and after midnight, with the enforced stripping of the womenfolk and Prasanna's orders to Lal-

<sup>165</sup> I owe this point to Tanika Sarkar.

mohan to kill his son, that tensions apparently reached breaking-point. Compliance till then out of cowardice alone is not entirely satisfactory as an explanation. Prasanna's amazing power that night could not have been purely innate: presumably it had some roots in the already established interrelations between Kalachand, Lalmohan, Prasanna himself, and the other members of the Majumdar household. We do at times get the impression, almost, of a kind of sacred theatre, with some sort of 'script'—a script, however, into which Prasanna inserted improvisations, which shattered in the end the earlier unity of the protagonists.

What that script could have meant to its authors remains more than a little obscure, for we know nothing about the details of Kalachand's teachings. All that appears reasonably certain is that the cult initially involved a devotion to Hari explicitly placed above Shakti-worship, and was expressed through a lot of ganja and song; that the sadhu's caranamrita and ashes from his kalki were supposed to cure miraculously; and that, shortly before 23 Agrahayan, Kalachand started claiming to be Kalki-avatar and predicting some kind of yuga-pralay. Beyond that, the differences in readings begin, and these require some exploration, however tentative.

Prasanna on the night of 23 Agrahayan at first sight appears to signify a moment of uninhibited plebeian fury: smashing and burning houses; insulting, beating up and stripping his social betters; burning a Brahmin's sacred thread and urinating on a *bhadramahila*; defying the police and army of British India. But we must not forget that Prasanna got the chance of entering the Majumdar house only because he had become the disciple of a Brahmin sadhu, and so was in a sense no longer quite the usual Chandal. He was rather what the *KM* pamphlet called a 'Chandal sadhu'.<sup>166</sup> His fury expressed itself through picking up and rearranging, *bricoleur*-fashion,<sup>167</sup> fragments of dominant culture. It signifies, therefore, not a totally independent level or set of texts and beliefs, but autonomous ways of appropriation.<sup>168</sup>

<sup>166</sup> During their first stay at the Majumdars, Rajani recalled Prasanna performing the appropriate subordinate function of preparing ganja for the sadhu and Lalmohan. *KM*, pp. 1, 55.

<sup>167</sup> The analogy of the *bricoleur* is developed in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London, 1981), pp. 16–36. For an application to the history of popular culture, see David W. Sabean, *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 90–1.

<sup>168</sup> 'The search for a specific and exclusively popular culture, often a disappointing quest, must be replaced by the search for the differentiated ways in which common

Lalmohan, the best educated in the circle around Kalachand, was called 'Dronacharya' by Prasanna—someone from whom sacred knowledge had to be acquired. The Chandal made a special point of asking 'Dronacharya' to recite a mantra before starting the fire—which to him was an '*yajna*'.<sup>169</sup> Prasanna had been seen brandishing a bow two days before the murder—he was Ekalavya, perhaps, but unlike the deferential adivasi of the Mahabharata he did not hesitate to bully, insult, or even beat 'Dronacharya'.<sup>170</sup> He was simultaneously Hanuman, burning Doyhata as Lanka had been burnt or possibly also the capital of Koli, which too had been destroyed by fire. Once again, what was conspicuously absent was the note of deferential bhakti so characteristic of Hanuman in the Ramayana.

The events of 23 Agrahayan turned around the three nodal points of the killing of Ananda, fire and nudity. Death rituals in Hinduism have a strong sacrificial element, through which the quotidian is elevated to the sacred and liminality is reintegrated. The murder of Ananda, too, was possibly a kind of sacrifice, though a very different one from the conventional 'offering of the dead person . . . to the gods and ancestors' at the purified cremation-ground, governed by caste rules and mantras.<sup>171</sup> The high-castes Lalmohan and Tona displayed no qualms in helping the Chandal carry the body of the murdered Bhuinmali. Kalachand, however, seems to have ordered some kind of cleansing of the site of the murder immediately afterwards, which may or may not have had a ritual significance. No proper death ritual is permitted anyway in cases of unnatural death, and one might also speculate that the association of untouchables (Doms in particular, who are sometimes loosely called Chandals) with funerals and executions might have somewhat reduced the transgressive elements here for the upper-caste protagonists.<sup>172</sup>

The killing of Ananda provided a kind of meeting-place for sever-

material was used.' Roger Chartier, 'Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France', in Steven Kaplan, ed., *Understanding Popular Culture* (Mouton, 1984), p. 235.

<sup>169</sup> Barada and Sashimukhi recalled Prasanna's request to Lalmohan, and Mahim Sarkar quoted Prasanna as saying 'Today I will perform *yajna* with fire'. *KM*, pp. 42, 52, 63.

<sup>170</sup> Evidence of Jogmaya at Dacca, *ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>171</sup> Veena Das, 'The Uses of Liminality: Society and Cosmos in Hinduism', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, NS, 10, ii, July–December 1976.

<sup>172</sup> H. H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, volume 1 (Calcutta, 1891), pp. 184, 240.

al different conceptions of yuga-pralay. For Kalachand and Lalmohan, yuga-pralay meant the coming of Kalki, and Ananda, identified by them curiously not with Koli but with Yama, had to be killed or sacrificed as the necessary prelude. How Yama got into the scenario remains extremely mysterious. The god of death does not figure in the Kalki myth at all, and the restoration of satya-yuga never promised any deliverance from death or purely physical suffering of the kind Lalmohan had been talking about.

Prasanna, however, never referred to Kalachand as Kalki-avatar: to him, the sadhu was always 'guru' or 'gossain'. Maybe the Kalki-myth, with its insistence upon rigid caste subordination, had little appeal to the Chandal, less certainly than Vaishnava bhakti which at least promised a certain mitigation of hierarchy, a level of devotion where Brahmin and untouchable could be momentarily one in a communion of ganja and song. Nor did Prasanna ever justify Ananda's murder as the killing of Yama. His version, confirmed by Tona, was that Ananda had offered himself as a victim (the note of sacrifice again, but in a different sense) to prove Kalachand's greatness to the world. The sadhu would bring about a miraculous physical resurrection: according to Lalmohan, Prasanna had promised Ananda a *dibya-deha* (divine body). Lalmohan himself was later offered 'a son of gold' by Prasanna, in return for killing Nanda. When he refused, Prasanna declared that he had turned into a goat.<sup>173</sup>

It is just possible that we are encountering here traces of belief-structures quite distinct from the Koli-yuga-Kalki tradition—a discordant physical note, embodied perhaps also in Lalmohan and Kalachand's assertions that the killing of Yama would end death in the world. The Nath cult, influential among plebeian groups in East Bengal for centuries, had sought to make the physical body immortal through various yogic practices; its myths include references to errant men being turned into goats or sheep.<sup>174</sup> Such practices, however, were eminently esoteric, conducted normally in secret and away from everyday household life. Their possible importation into a bhadralok household was deeply transgressive.

Kalachand, we know, had disparaged the worship of Kali, and yet the first thing Prasanna did after the murder was to smear his guru,

<sup>173</sup> Evidence of Jogmaya, *Bengalee*, 16 March 1905.

<sup>174</sup> Sashibhushan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults* (Calcutta, 1946, 1976), part III, and Appendix C.

Lalmohan and himself with Ananda's blood, an obviously Shakta rite.<sup>175</sup> He also made Rajlakshmi stand naked on his lap in what a witness described was 'the posture of Kali'.<sup>176</sup> The juxtaposition of Shakta and Vaishnava elements in Prasanna is not really surprising: the two had been intermingling at least from the eighteenth century, as evident notably in the Shyama-sangeet of Ramprasad and the entire phenomenon of Ramakrishna.

The fires were started at Prasanna's initiative, but 'Dronacharya' Lalmohan apparently blessed this yajna, and no one seems to have been too worried by them: the Majumdar house was never seriously in danger. That Bhuinmali and Muslim houses were principally affected by Prasanna's arson efforts could have been accidental. Raiyat homesteads would burn more easily than a bhadralok house. Alternatively, one could argue that subaltern identity is quite often also defined in terms of groups lying still lower in the social hierarchy.<sup>177</sup> Chandals and Bhuinmalis, we know, were quarrelling over precedence at that time, and Namasudra-Muslim relations in subsequent years were marked by occasional conflicts.<sup>178</sup>

The stripping of women (and of one or two men) had a purificatory significance for the sadhu and his bhadralok disciple. '*Astapash mukta hoa*', liberation from the eight sins, was how Lalmohan described it, and he seems to have taken off his own clothes, too.<sup>179</sup> Liberation from wordly dross through nudity does have an important role at times in the *sadhana* of the ascetic or *sanyasi*: we are as yet not beyond the limits of high Hinduism. There was obviously a difference, however, between Lalmohan and Kalachand disrobing their caste equals, and Prasanna stripping off the clothes from his social superiors. It is difficult not to suspect layers of meaning here apart from an ascetic rejection of worldly superfluities. Clothes are a major significata of social rank and class, the obvious indicators even today in Bengal of the bhadralok and the chotolok. A man like

<sup>175</sup> Deposition of Prasanna at Munshiganj, *KM*, p. 18.

<sup>176</sup> Jogmaya's evidence, *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>177</sup> Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal 1928–34: The Politics of Protest* (Delhi, 1987), p. 148.

<sup>178</sup> Namasudra-Muslim riots affected eighteen villages along the Jassore-Khulna border in May 1911. Namasudras and Muslims had combined, however, against upper-caste Hindu landlords in Jessore and Khulna in 1908. Sumit Sarkar, 'The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Cooperation c. 1905–22', in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies III* (Delhi, 1984), p. 283.

<sup>179</sup> *KM*, p. 61.

Prasanna might well have been going around in loincloth.

The central act in the peculiar kind of sacred theatre Prasanna conducted that night was the purification of women, and he had been abusing women in particular for not respecting the sadhu for some days before. They were stripped, made to touch a fire, had their pubic hair burnt, and Rajlakshmi had a kalki thrust into her vagina. No attempt was made to castrate or abuse in any way male genitalia. Prasanna, in other words, seems to have shared the pervasive male high-culture suspicion about women as the gateway to hell, and feminine sexuality as specially impure and dangerous. The Nath-yogi literature, too, is full of tales of feminine malignity.<sup>180</sup>

Purification involved inversion: nudity, as well as the penetration of the vagina by the kalki (not dissimilar in shape to the penis), far from having any sexual implications, had precisely the opposite significance that night in Prasanna's mind, and there is not the slightest hint of any attempt at rape. There are also indications that women purified came close to the sacred for him: once again, we have an echo of a high-culture theme. He addressed Rajlakshmi as 'mother' while stripping her, used a term of respect for the women touching fire, and claimed to have seen 'two devatas' himself while this ritual was being performed.<sup>181</sup> Incidentally, the only time Prasanna showed any regret in court was about the way he had 'infringed the modesty of a woman.'<sup>182</sup>

Prasanna's inversions had a ritual character. Men and women were stripped, asked to salute the sadhu, and then allowed to put on their clothes and leave. Levelling-down through nudity was purely temporary. But Prasanna, after all, was not enacting an established ritual, but, perhaps, groping towards a new one. For one night, he did achieve the remarkable feat of a kind of double inversion. The Koli-yuga myth was an inverted world with Shudras and women on top, which the Kalki-avatar would set right side up again, restoring proper caste and gender hierarchy and deference. Its nineteenth-century forms had not even considered Shudras the major source of disorder. Not only had the Chandals burst into and taken over a re-enactment of the myth by a Brahmin sadhu and a bhadralok disciple, he had appropriated bits of it, along with fragments from epics equally deferential in intent, to terrorize the Doyhata bhadralok and

<sup>180</sup> Sasibhushan Dasgupta, pp. 244–9, 398.

<sup>181</sup> Deposition of Prasanna, *KM*, pp. 9, 19.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

make a wife kick her husband on the forehead. It is fitting, then, that Prasanna be given the last word. Asked by the judge to sign the statement taking full responsibility for all that had happened, Prasanna replied: 'Jadi likkhai jantam, tobe to panch-shat-shata taka mahinae joj-i hoyitam'. (If I had known how to write, why, then, I would have become a judge and earned five to seven hundred rupees).<sup>183</sup>

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

# The Mentality of Subalternity: *Kantanama or Rajdharma*

GAUTAM BHADRA

I attempt in this essay to focus on certain features of what may be called the subaltern mentality. It is well known that defiance is not the only characteristic of the behaviour of subaltern classes. Submissiveness to authority in one context is as frequent as defiance in another. It is these two elements that together constitute the subaltern mentality. It is on account of this combination that the poor and the oppressed have, time and again, and in different histories, made voluntary sacrifices in favour of the rich and the dominant, at least as often as they have rebelled against the latter.

Certain assumptions made here need to be emphasized. First, the idioms of domination, subordination and revolt, I believe, are often inextricably linked together; we separate them here only to facilitate analysis. If this is true, it follows that subordination or domination is seldom complete, if ever. The process is marked by struggle and resistance. The purpose of my analysis is precisely to highlight some of these tensions with reference to a particular text.

## I. *The Text*

The text under discussion is a long poem called *Kantanama* or *Rajdharma*. It was written by one Dewan Manulla Mandal who lived in a village called Fakanda, now situated in Balurghat subdivision, West Dinajpur, West Bengal. The text was discovered in 1913 (1320 BS) by the noted Bengali scholar Nalinikanta Bhattacharya while he was engaged in a search for old Bengali manuscripts. The exact transcription of the manuscript with all its typical spellings and local usages was later published by the Dacca Sahitya Parishat. Bhattacharya

wrote an introduction and added notes to the text which I have found useful.<sup>1</sup>

Fakanda is the name of my village,  
 Gurai Mandal that of my father,  
 And I, thus, humble fellow,  
 Am his son,  
 Dinachpur is my *Sirasthan* [Sudder area]  
 Jobsa is the name of my *pargana*,  
 While my *chakala* is in Bhongra.<sup>2</sup>

The village of Fakanda lay in the *zamindari* of the famous Kasimbazar raj. The area was named Kantanagar, after the founder of the house, Krishna Kanta Nandi. It was within five miles of Bairatnagar, a place of ancient legends and archaeological remains. Enquiries made by Bhattasali in Manulla Mandal's village revealed that Manulla had often worked as a copyist of texts such as *Mainamatir Punthi*. He also wrote a long narrative in verse about the old kingdom of Bairatnagar. Bhattasali was confident that the manuscript of the text of *Kantanama* that he had discovered was written in the author's own handwriting. The text runs to sixty pages and the date given on the last page is 1250 BS (1842–3), a couple of years before Krishna Nath Nandi, the then zamindar, died. Krishna Nath figures very prominently in Mandal's book. It was during Krishna Nath's rule that Mandal felt the urge to write the book. *Kantanama* and *Rajdharma* were names given by the author himself; he referred to the text by these names, though more often by 'Rajdharma' rather than 'Kantanama'.<sup>3</sup>

From the text it is evident that the author was a member of the hereditary Mandal family; he refers to male ancestors of five generations. He belonged to a joint family. At the time of composition of the book he was an old man and was seemingly under severe personal stress. He had experienced economic distress because of a fire that destroyed his house and property. By the time he came to write the book, Mandal had lost all his relatives, including seven sons.

<sup>1</sup> (Abbreviations used: BR = Board of Revenue; BRW = Board of Revenue Wards; WBSA = West Bengal State Archives.) Dewan Manulla Mandal, krita *Kantanama* or *Rajdharma*, ed. Nalinikanta Bhattasali (Dacca Sahitya Parishat Granthabali, no. 8, 1320 BS, Calcutta, 1913, cited hereafter as KN).

<sup>2</sup> KN, p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> Introduction by Bhattasali, *ibid.*, pp. 14–19.

'My seven sons have been taken away from me, hurting me greatly. What happiness can be there if sons die before the father?'<sup>4</sup> And again, 'Yet another calamity befell me. My houses and possessions were destroyed in a fire. And then god gave me a dream.'<sup>5</sup>

It is necessary to underline here the social significance of the terms *Mandal* and *Dewan* in the context of the rural society of Dinajpur during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Mandal* was the term for the head man of the rural community and referred to the family of the original settlers of the village. In the nineteenth century Patwaris and Mandals were gradually incorporated in the revenue system of the zamindars and became their salaried agents. It has been suggested, however, that in Dinajpur, where the zamindars were relatively less powerful, Mandals retained some of their old autonomy and customary position. A *Mandal* was the representative of his 'community', he was 'one of the persons of the village who bear in the estimation of the community the highest character of responsibility and trustworthiness.' He was an arbitrator of disputes and a spokesman who represented peasants to the authorities. He was not generally on the payroll of the zamindar but certainly enjoyed certain privileges at the time of revenue assessment.<sup>6</sup> In fact, many Mandals in the area under discussion belonged to the *khudkasht* category of peasants—prosperous and enjoying *sir* lands at concessional rates. This land was the *Mandal's jot*, which sometimes extended over a fairly large area. Most Mandals were Mussalmans and were hereditary resident cultivators.<sup>7</sup>

Manulla also held the title of dewan. *Dewan* generally meant the principal officer of a big zamindari establishment.<sup>8</sup> But in Dinajpur and Rungpur dewan had a specific meaning. People who pleaded the case of peasants in court or to the zamindar and were well-versed in laws and regulations of settlement were called dewans. Various settlement officers have commented on the influence these dewans exercised in the affairs of the village and their capacity to

<sup>4</sup> KN, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 8, 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Papers regarding the village of rural indigenous agency employed in taking the Bengal Census of 1872* (Calcutta, 1873, Bengal Govt. selections, no. 47), pp. 27–8.

<sup>7</sup> F. O. Bell, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Dinajpur, 1934–40* (Calcutta, 1942), para 42, pp. 9–11, para 72, p. 88.

<sup>8</sup> Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, *A Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of the District or Zilla of Dinajpur* (Calcutta, 1833), p. 250.

regulate the connection of the rural community with the outside world.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Manulla Mandal's connection to his own village should take on a particular significance in the text. Bhattasali had also witnessed how Manulla's descendants, engaged in cultivation and living in the same village, had a familiarity with the local court. Long residence in a particular village was characteristic of a khudkasht peasant. Being a Mandal and a dewan, therefore, it is very likely that Manulla, in his long poem, spoke not only as a prosperous peasant but also as a leader of the village community to which he belonged.

Manulla wrote his poem within the tradition of the medieval Bengali *panchali* or the *mangal kavyas*. Like all other poets in this tradition, he avers that he was asked to write by his destiny or fate (*bidhi*) or God (*niranjan*), at a time of intense personal and familial crisis. His sufferings, he later realized, were but a trial intended to prove his suitability for the task that fate had kept in store for him. As he wrote, 'A purposeless existence in this world—such indeed must have been my destiny. Two thirds of my life passed in happiness, the last one-third was to be full of sorrow. I stayed back [in the world] for a useless existence. I lost my way and became unhappy. The world became barren for me.' In the context of this depiction of a sorry and fruitless life:

On hearing this Niranjan spoke,  
Cry not, he said, my blue-eyed boy.  
You can write off your brothers or sons as illusions,  
Only I can take you across  
[the ocean of existence] in your final days,  
I have judged your mind and found you pure,  
You are indeed dear to me.  
Why do you think your life is wasted?  
You will live in heaven,  
And I shall never forsake you.  
...  
Go and write the story of the King—  
Your name will reign supreme in this world.<sup>10</sup>

Manulla repeats this story several times: that he received a divine order to write down in poetic form the exploits and glory of the

<sup>9</sup> Bell, para 16, p. 16; F. W. Strong, *Eastern Bengal District Gazetteer-Dinajpur* (Allahabad, 1912), pp. 33–4; F. Hartley, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement operations in Rungpur, 1931–38* (Alipore, 1940), p. 45, para 20.

<sup>10</sup> KN, pp. 9–11.

*zamindar. He sees his material and familial crises as following from this divinely appointed task:*

And the lord began to wonder how the deeds  
of the king could be propagated in the world.  
The narrator of the exploits of the virtuous  
king must pass the test of having his relatives  
killed by me

...  
Only he who does not forget me even in suffering  
will qualify to write this story  
That will bring salvation [literally benefit]  
to the king's ancestors...

...  
With these thoughts and to test me thus  
God struck me with the power of his anger.

...  
Helpless, I have to write down the words of God.  
Oh my fate,  
Your heart is made of stone,  
You have dealt me a severe blow  
And [thus] made me record the exploits of the King.<sup>11</sup>

This is a familiar theme within the medieval panchali. From Mukundaram to Manik Datta—the well-known writers of the *Chandi Mangal* and the *Manasa Mangal*—to the less-known writer of the poem *Gosain-mangal* written in Coochbehar, medieval authors almost invariably cite divine inspiration as explanation of their reason for writing. This was characteristic of the particular mentality in which an individual's writing was not seen as the product of his own talent but as ordained by god, fate or destiny. Chandi or Dharma or Manasa or Vishnu or Allah or Niranjan was the real actor while the mortal author was merely an instrument of divine will. Manulla was thus communicating his own thoughts within a well-established tradition, using the forms of *lachari* and *dopadi*. His losses and sufferings were personal and his own experience was the basis of his poem; yet the author transcended his own experience by placing it in a wider framework of religion and divinity. Everything in that framework was predestined and expressed the work of Niranjan or Allah. To write *Kantanama* was a task to be performed, and through this Manulla would achieve the ultimate mission of his life.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75–6.

At the same time, *Kantanama* was not merely a piece of literary self-fulfilment. Manulla intended reading it at the court of the zamindar, hoping to be materially rewarded for his effort. He thus thought of his spiritual future as well as of immediate material gain: 'I write *Rajdharma* at the bidding of god. When shall I be able to read it before the king? God willing, I should read it before the king one day. Otherwise there is no security for me.'<sup>12</sup> His expectations of the king are equally clearly stated: 'The king began to think of all the sufferings of the writer who was writing about his deeds. If I give him an elephant loaded with wealth, he thought, even that will not compensate his sufferings.'<sup>13</sup>

A historian has suggested that a local village official called Brajanath Hazra encouraged Manulla to write this poem, but there is no evidence to this effect.<sup>14</sup> Nor is it clear that Manulla ever really got an opportunity to read his poem before the zamindar. However, he also had a general audience in mind. A refrain in *Kantanama* or *Rajdharma* runs:

The king, an incarnation of dharma,  
Never mentions *babat* [cess].  
Know this,  
Oh you, the community of *praja* [subjects]  
That God is merciful.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout his work Manulla Mandal never forgets this *prajar samaj*. His own experience, his social role, his own despair and hopes, are all expressed in a language and consciousness which is permeated with a religiosity meaningful to rural society. Its expression is perfectly in tune with the panchali tradition of medieval Bengali poetry. The following passage will ring familiar to any student of Bengali panchalis:

With great care  
Shah Manulla has written this story  
As told to him in a dream.  
He who listens to it with devotion  
Will be saved from all misfortunes.  
He who plagiarizes this book  
Will have donkeys for parents,

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>14</sup> S. C. Nandy, *History of the Cossimbazar Raj*, vol. 1 (Calcutta, 1986), p. 286.

<sup>15</sup> KN, p. 105.

Will be born in poverty, and  
 Will have his desires unfulfilled.  
 Go to hell he will in the end  
 And his family line will be terminated,  
 While he who takes care of this book *Rajdharna*  
 Will be rewarded with a place in the world of Baikuntha.<sup>16</sup> \*

## II. *The Cultural World of Manulla*

Fakanda is now an obscure village in Dinajpur. But it has its own culture and Manulla was aware of that. There was a strong tradition of *pirism* among the peasants in Dinajpur, mostly Rajbangshis and Muslims. Many Rajbangshis had been converted to the *pir* variant of Islam and were called the *nasyas*.<sup>17</sup> The strength of this tradition made it difficult for the Farazis to penetrate this region in the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Even after their partial success in the early twentieth century, *pirism* thrived as before. It was noted by an acute observer in the early nineteenth century (1807) that there was hardly any village in this district that did not contain a *pirsthān* (place of worship).<sup>19</sup> Official statements of the 1930s confirm this impression. Along with this, Vaishnavism had spread among the Rajbangshis and survived the onslaught of a Kshatriya Movement led by Rai Bahadur Panchanan Barman.<sup>20</sup> These two religious movements—Vaishnavism and *pirism*—have always overlapped, producing shifting and indeterminate boundaries. For both Satya Pir's song and Manasa's song the group of singers often remained the same; only the symbols and the dress changed.<sup>21</sup> In the two big locally-held fairs called Nek Marad and Gopinather mela people of various communities participated without hesitation or inhibition.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 106–7.

<sup>17</sup> Strong, pp. 36–7. *Report on the survey and settlement of the Churaman Estate* (Calcutta, 1891), p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> F. O. Bell, p. 11, para 12.

<sup>19</sup> Buchanan-Hamilton, pp. 92–3, p. 111.

<sup>20</sup> F. O. Bell, pp. 9–13; Atulchandra Chakraborty, 'Pashim Dinajpurer Tin Laukik Debata', *Pratilipi*, Ashvin 1388, 3rd year, 3rd issue; Golam Saklaen, *Purba Pakistaner Sufi Sadhak* (Dacca, 1368 BS), pp. 63–8. Hartley, pp. 84–7.

<sup>21</sup> J. C. Sengupta, *West Bengal District Gazetteer, West Dinajpur* (1965), pp. 84–7.

<sup>22</sup> Strong, p. 239; J. L. Sherwill, *Geographical and Statistical Report of the Dinajpur District* (Calcutta, 1863), p. 28.

Grierson noted this development in his study of Rangpur and Dinajpur. He found illiterate minstrels roaming the countryside, reciting to peasants the ballads of Mainamati and Gopichandra.<sup>23</sup> He also discovered in this area a ballad, adapted from the Bhagavat, which described the birth of Srikrishna. His comments are worth quoting:

The third specimen is a song describing the birth of Krishna. It is by far the most popular song amongst the Hindus of the district. It is not extant complete but I have been able to collect many pieces and to repatch them into something like the original song which no doubt originally existed. I have been able to produce a pretty fair text; as there is hardly a line of which I have not obtained two or three copies. Considering the great distances from each other at which the places were whence I obtained the fragments, it is wonderful how they agree; especially as it is not customary for the reciters to possess written copies, or even to be able to read them if they did.<sup>24</sup>

The unity and similarity of the textual content of the songs current over a vast region of north Bengal indicate the existence of a vigorous oral tradition. The illiterate singers of villages have continued within that tradition, making improvisations but retaining the overall structure of the *pala*.

Alongside these palas and songs there was also a tradition of Kathakata. Putatively of ancient origin, this tradition was popular in rural Bengal as late as the last decades of the nineteenth century. The *kathaks* (katha means tale; kathak is a story-teller) recited Vaishnava stories before rural gatherings. It was a performing art requiring considerable histrionic skills on the part of the performer. The speaker told stories from the *puranas*, always explaining their moral import, adapting them to suit the taste of the local audience but successfully delivering the moral contained in these stories.<sup>25</sup> It has been stated in official documents that high-caste Brahmins from various areas visited Dinajpur annually at a particular time of the year,

<sup>23</sup> G. A. Grierson, 'The Song of Manik Chandra', *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1878, pp. 135–238.

<sup>24</sup> Grierson, 'Notes on the Rangpur Dialect', *ibid.*, 1877, XLVI, p. 201.

<sup>25</sup> Dinesh Chandra Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature* (Calcutta, 1911), pp. 588–90. Sukumar Sen, 'Kathakata', *Bharat Kosh*, 2nd vol. (Bangiya Sahitya Parisad, 1967), pp. 150–1. Also see Bipin Behari Chakraborty, *Khatunar Itibas O Kushodvip Kahini* (Calcutta, 1908).

and their presence, daily norms and discourses created great excitement among various categories of people in Dinajpur.<sup>26</sup> A typical description of this type of art performed by the brahmins is given by a person from another part of Bengal—from the *rarh* area—where this art-form was quite popular. In this case the narrator's mother arranged for the performance in order to keep a pledge she had made to the gods.

A raised platform was erected at the Atchala and all the people of the village were invited to listen to a reading of the Ramayana. . . In the evening the reader began to read the text. The village was small. About fifty to sixty men and thirty to forty women came and took their place in the audience. The *pathak* [reader] at first read out three or four verses from the Ramayana and then began to explain them. What a range of strategies he had for interpretation. Sometimes he would act, sometimes he would use a characteristically male language, on other occasions he would begin to lament in the soft voice of a woman, and so on and so forth. He thus performed for one and a half hours. The audience listened with rapt attention. Every day this type of performance was put on. It wasn't the same people who turned up every day to listen . . . Few among the audience were educated, and even for those who were their education stopped at *pathsala* [village primary school] level. Yet they were able to grasp the sense of the highly sanskritized language used by the kathak . . . The audience came for two reasons. It was thought that listening to a recitation of the Ramayana conferred *punya* [merit] on people; they used to come to earn such punya. Secondly, if they did not come, my mother's vow would be broken and she would become a sinner. They could not do that to her. For this reason also, they attended the performance.<sup>27</sup>

Bankim Chandra also once noted the role that 'the dark and plump' kathak thakur played in preaching certain moral values among rural people:

The ploughman, the cotton-carder, the spinner, or even the person without food—they all learnt [from listening to the kathak]. They learnt that *dharma* was eternal and divinely ordained, that to be self-seeking was demeaning, that there was a thing called *pap* and a thing called *punya* deserving punishment and reward, and that life was not meant for one's self [i.e. for one's own pleasures] but for others.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> W. K. Firminger, ed., *Bengal Dist. Records, Dinajpur*, letter no. 194, dated 3rd Sept. 1787, vol. II, 1786 (Calcutta, 1924).

<sup>27</sup> Jogesh Chandra Roy Vidyanidhi, *Pauranik Upakhyan* (Calcutta, 1361 BS), pp. 87–8. Cf. Dinendra Kumar Roy, *Sekaler Smriti* (Calcutta, 1395 BS), pp. 42–3.

<sup>28</sup> Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, 'Loksiksha', *Collected Works*, Samsad Edition, 2nd volume (Calcutta, 1371 BS), p. 377.

Thus Kathakata performed certain distinct services. It popularized brahminical culture through highly effective fables and stories, upholding certain standards of morality and values derived essentially from the culture of the elite. However, within its framework there was always ample scope for accommodating elements that emerged out of the lives of ordinary people. Through twists and turns in the narrative, through varying emphases, through additional commentaries, the kathak always made references to local affairs and incidents. The text he used usually contained a variety of themes, ranging from sanskritized moral tales to erotic descriptions of prostitutes or humorous descriptions of different types of sweets. His songs comprised a mixed bag, containing sanskrit verses as well as local Bengali songs. A successful kathak was always responsive to the moods of the different types of audience he encountered, for these could be, at times, highly sensitive and responsive to his performance.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many local chieftains, in their own interest, began to popularize various Vaishnava and Sanskrit texts in this region. The Raj families of Cooch-behar and Dinajpur took the initiative in this matter.<sup>30</sup> The panel of sculptures at the famous temple at Kantanagar in Dinajpur, for example, contains a full depiction of the life of Krishna.<sup>31</sup> In this cultural world we can probably discern the interaction of two elements: the classical or *marga* with the popular or *jana*. Through the Kathakata and extensive translation of the various texts of the puranas and the Bhagavat there could have been a conscious attempt on the part of the local zamindari houses to spread and uphold certain kinds of values and moral frameworks among the lower orders. But this was an active and two-way process. The popular and folk elements continuously changed and absorbed the classical in their own way. Grierson describes the perception of the Bhagavat by the singers themselves in the villages of north Bengal:

<sup>29</sup> Pranakishor Goswami, *Kathakatar Katha* (Calcutta, 1375), pp. 19–20; Haripada Chakraborty, 'Kathakatar Punthi', *Subarnalekha*, ed. Ashutosh Bhattacharya and Asit Bandyopadhyay (Calcutta, 1974), pp. 580–92.

<sup>30</sup> Sashi Bhushan Dasgupta, *A descriptive catalogue of Bengali manuscripts preserved in the state library of Cooch-Behar* (Calcutta, 1948); Sukumar Sen, *Bangla Sahityer Itihas*, 1st part (Calcutta, 1975), pp. 427 and 447.

<sup>31</sup> Gauri Shankar De, 'Temple of Kantanagar', *Proceedings of Indian History Congress* (Burdwan, 1983), pp. 592–603.

'They have found them in songs, and it is not their business to alter things written in the Satya-yuga. Sometimes they are unable to explain whole passages, saying "it is Satyayuger Katha, how are we to know it?". For other words they have a traditional meaning.'<sup>32</sup> Incomprehension, ambiguity and tradition made the popular reception of these classical tales quite distinct from the appreciation they received in the Sastric world. Many local versions of various incidents of these epics and of the puranas were composed, catering to an altogether different rustic audience. *Angad's Raibar* (the story of Angad abusing Ravana), for example, was universally popular among the peasants. It was later expunged from the standard edition of Kritibas's Ramayana by its famous editor Dinesh Sen, as it was supposed to be vulgar.<sup>33</sup> This type of acceptance, adaptation and rejection is mutual at both levels and an expression of power relations between the dominant and the dominated. Thus, while one can discern certain 'classical' (marga) elements in 'popular' (jana) culture, the blending is never entirely harmonious.

As opposed to this vertical interaction between the classical and the popular elements of culture, another type of connection was horizontal, taking place among the various trends within popular culture itself. Here, many contiguous local and regional cultural groups overlapped with each other. In north Bengal the cult of Sona Rai was an example of this. He was, at one place, known as the protector of the field, while at another place he was the god of tigers. Somewhere else he was a Vaisnava saint who had saved the Koran from desecration, while at yet another place he was a pir and had saved the Hindu religious texts from a similar fate.<sup>34</sup>

It was almost impossible to distinguish *madari pirs* and the *naths* in Dinajpur.<sup>35</sup> Here the Niranjan of the naths and the Allah of the madaris were almost interchangeable. There were, and still are, a large number of small ruined buildings in this area, and these are

<sup>32</sup> Grierson (1877), p. 226.

<sup>33</sup> Sukumar Sen, *Bangla Sahityer Itibas*, pp. 424–5; Dinesh Sen, ed., *Kritibasi Ramayan* (Calcutta, 14th print, 1955), see introduction.

<sup>34</sup> Sarat Chandra Mitra, 'On the cult of Sonaraya in Eastern Bengal', *Journal of the Dept. of Letters* (Calcutta University, 1922), pp. 141–72, 173–206.

<sup>35</sup> Abdul Wali, 'Notes on the Faqirs of Balia-dighi in Dinajpur', *Proceedings, Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1903), p. 100; J. M. Ghosh, *Sannyasi and Fakir Raiders in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1920). For detailed descriptions on the Nath-Panthis, *vide* Kalyani Mallik, *Nath-Sampradayer Itibas, Darshan o Sadhan Pranali* (Calcutta, 1950), pp. 14–15, 102, 181.

used both by the Burhana pirs and the Nath jogis for purposes of worship.<sup>36</sup> One of the major features of these types of cultural interaction is to be seen at the linguistic level. Here, recourse is often had to the consonance of sounds or images to transform one god into another, a procedure that appeals more to popular conceptions of godheads as well as to popular responses to alliteration, rhyming and other rhetorical devices—rather than to any elaborate structure of reason and argument. One typical example of such transformation is given below:

*Dharma has assumed the form of a Yavan.  
 Sporting a black cap and wielding a bow and arrows  
 He rides a powerful horse,  
 And is a terror to the world.  
 The formless Niranjan has become a heavenly avatar,  
 The word *dam* constantly on his lips.  
 Brahma became Muhammad,  
 Vishnu, Paigambar, [and]  
 the holder of the trident [i.e. Shiva]  
 transformed into Adam.  
 Ganesh changed into Ghazi  
 Kartik into Kazi  
 And the *munis* all became fakirs.<sup>37</sup>*

This particular type of transformation and mutuality between two cultures, Hindu and Muslim, has generally been hailed by liberal scholars as proof of the tolerance or ‘syncretism’ practised by Hindus and Muslims at the popular level. This, however, is not an entirely satisfactory formulation. It is true that these transformations do show a certain tendency to transgress the boundaries of official or formal Islam and Hinduism. There was a flexibility in these types of movements which may have made it comparatively easy for the lower orders to bypass the rigid and formal structures of elite culture in a feudal society.<sup>38</sup> In our area, Grierson provides an example. Side by side with the recitation of the Bhagavat and Puranic palas there existed a tradition of bawdy and satirical rhymes

<sup>36</sup> Abdul Kalam Mh. Jakaria, ed., *Sukur Muhammad's Gopichander Sanyas* (Bangla Academy, Dacca, 1974), pp. 92–4.

<sup>37</sup> Bhakti Madhav Chattopadhyay, ed., *Ramai Panditer Sunya Puran* (Calcutta, 1977), p. 160. Along with Professor Muhammad Shahidullah, the editor says that this part is a later edition and has been composed, probably, in the eighteenth century.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1968), chapter 1.

in which everything turned into its opposite, every action led to an unintended and unconventional end. This was a way of pointing out the inconsistencies of this world. Such songs were quite popular in the rural areas of north Bengal.<sup>39</sup> So, in this culture, there was a mixture of many things which cannot be formalized in accordance with a hierarchical principle, and which could not be easily appropriated by elite culture. At the same time, this mutuality of Hindu and Muslim gods does not imply their fusion. Brahma becoming Muhammad and Ganesh becoming Ghazi did not mean that they had lost their separate identities. As gods they usually retained their separate significations. Nor does a bland theory of 'tolerance' help much in understanding the acute intolerance and sectarianism that popular sects sometimes displayed towards one another.

The imprint of both popular and elite culture, i.e. of both marga and jana, can be traced in Manulla Mandal's text. The author begins his poem with an invocation to Vishnu or Hari:

Hari is the ultimate wealth [possession]  
 He is the essence of everything.  
 Without him there is no salvation  
 Ill-fated are those who do not know [the power of] Hari,  
 For, to hell they are eternally condemned.

But Hari is, at the same time, Niranjan, the symbol of the naths and the Burhana pir. Time and again Hari is replaced by Niranjan:

Of forms he has none.  
 Like the air, he is without colour or shape.  
 By the power of his *nur* [light]  
 He created the world  
 And nurtures it as a father.<sup>40</sup>

Manulla Mandal was aware of puranic and Sanskritic traditions, and often cites instances from these. He describes Baikuntha, the abode of Hari, and mentions the Kalki avatar. He writes thus about the court pundits of Krishna Nath: 'They know the *tantras*, the *puras* and the great *Bhagavat*. They know even the Chaitanya-Charitamrita.'<sup>41</sup> He adds, 'Whatever I have written in this book has support in the *Bhagavat Puran*'.<sup>42</sup> At the same time he was aware

<sup>39</sup> Grierson (1877), pp. 196–7.

<sup>40</sup> KN, pp. 1–3.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

of the local nath tradition. He made a copy of Sukur Muhammad's *Gopichandrer Geet*, and wrote a poem about Bairatnagar which contained the ballad of 'Ghazi Kalu and Champavati'.<sup>43</sup> It is not unnatural, therefore, that his Hari could be easily interchanged with Niranjan or Allah. In his book, God can easily say: 'I am Ram, I am Rahim and I am Hari.'<sup>44</sup> Once again, the alliterative mechanism works, and the glory of Hari can easily be expressed in the nur of Allah.

Thus, Manulla's book stands at a symmetrical intersection of traditions where Baikuntha finds its counterpart in Behesht, where Hari and Niranjan reflect each others' forms. Manulla moves freely in both traditions and borrows images and arguments from both; at the same time, he changes them in the process. This gives the text flexibility and plasticity, and also helps Manulla fashion his stories and messages more effectively.

### *III. Dinajpur: Its People and History*

The history of the district of Dinajpur has been characterized by an official in very clear terms:

With the breaking of the Dinajpur Raj (1800–1808), the history of the district ceases to be of interest to the outside public. The old saying that 'happy is the country that has no history' may fairly be applied to Dinajpur, in which no important events of political nature have occurred to disturb the even tenor of administration and material development.<sup>45</sup>

This is typical of the colonial view: 'no important events of political nature', hence 'no history'. But Manulla's *Kantanama* is full of 'events', events important for his life and village. His overall concern was with the Kasimbazar zamindari and its development, but he also wrote as a ryot who was concerned about zamindari demands, especially the extra cess or *abwab*.

It has been argued recently that in this area there were a few big zamindaris and families who came from outside the district and who maintained control within it through zamindari *amlabs* (functionaries) and extensive establishments.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, in consequ-

<sup>43</sup> Introduction to *Kantanama*, pp. 3–5.

<sup>44</sup> KN, p. 71.

<sup>45</sup> F. W. Strong, p. 27.

<sup>46</sup> For the process, Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society*,

ence of the breakdown of older zamindari houses like the Dinajpur raj family, zamindari officials and substantial peasant proprietors reaped the maximum possible benefit. Through the *kuthkanidars* they established contact with the zamindar to pay revenue and transferred the burden of rent on to the tenants. This class provided the big *jotedars* of the later period. In areas where land was abundant it was these big farmers who organized cultivation, controlled capital and foodstock, and fought zamindars if the terms were not favourable to them. Buchanan-Hamilton has eloquently described their power: 'Whenever one of them is discontented, he gives up his farm, and retires with all his dependants to some other estate, where there are waste lands which his stock enables him to clear. The village which he left is then for some years unoccupied, unless the landlord can find a fugitive of the same kind.' This type of mandal peasant could create a lot of trouble for the zamindar, the *izaradar* and the state; from time to time their threat to withdraw from cultivation would even take the more serious form of defiance.

The small peasants and tenants were, in many ways, forced to depend on them, to bow to their will. In another well-known passage Buchanan-Hamilton has underlined the nature of this dependence: 'It is true, that these large farmers exact enormous profits for whatever they advance to their necessitous dependants but still they are of infinite use to these people, who without their assistance would be instantly reduced to the state of common labourers and often to beggary.'<sup>47</sup> This mutuality of dominance and dependence has also been stressed by later writers. It has been said that ordinary ryots were extremely wary of dealing directly with outsiders.<sup>48</sup> For Europeans and native officials the mandals were often the only contact with the village people. It seems that collectors like Grierson and Sherwill were always associated with fresh measurements or tax, and as such were unwelcome visitors to the village. State officials and the amlahs of landlords were also considered 'outsiders', a source of potential threat.<sup>49</sup> In this context of tension and distrust between the zamindari establishment and the peasant, the concilia-

<sup>1760–1860</sup> (New Delhi, 1979), Chapter 8; S. Taniguchi, 'Structure of Agrarian Society in Northern Bengal', unpublished thesis, Calcutta University, 1977.

<sup>47</sup> Buchanan-Hamilton, pp. 235–6.

<sup>48</sup> Sherwill, p. 9; Grierson (1877), pp. 187–8.

<sup>49</sup> *Survey and Settlement on Churaman Estate*, p. 36; *Survey and settlement on Maldwar Wards Estate* (1891), para 78.

tory ideology of *rajdharma* preached by Manulla Mandal in his *Kantanama* acquires special significance.

One of the major issues in the tension between landlord and peasant was the question of abwab. In general, abwab is considered by historians to have been an illegal cess and an extra burden on the peasants who, due to their helplessness and the superior political power of the landlords, had to pay up and suffer.<sup>50</sup> In Bengal there were three categories of these extra payments: abwab, a regular cess to be paid at regular intervals; *mathot* (from *matha*-head) payment taken for official needs and purposes; and *kharcha*, a payment for the expenses on revenue collection.<sup>51</sup> In practice the distinctions often got blurred. Though the colonial government banned these in the late eighteenth century, the peasants still had to pay these cesses to the zamindars. A colonial historian has explained this in terms of the 'mysterious passive sentiment' of the Bengali peasant.<sup>52</sup> In actual practice payments of abwab had much to do with the nature of the relationship between ryots and zamindars.

In many cases in Dinajpur, the ryots agreed to pay the abwab only as a gesture of compromise. In many areas the khudkasht peasants concealed the actual amount of land under cultivation, opposing any attempt on the part of the zamindar to measure the land afresh and to reassess the rent. The ryots agreed to pay some cess as 'compensation' to the zamindar, provided he did not insist on fresh measurement.<sup>53</sup> In most of these cases, the imposition of abwabs and *mangans* was a tacit compromise between ryots and zamindars, not an easy victory for the landlords. The amount collected varied from estate to estate. There are several instances of estates where the landlord succeeded in completing a fresh measurement with the result that the peasants of that estate refused to pay any extra cess. In other estates, where the new measurement was not made, the ryots, without apparent protest, paid various dues as abwab, mangan and kharcha. There are also reports of cases where

<sup>50</sup> Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* (Bombay, 1963), pp. 247–8; John R. McLane, 'Land Revenue Transactions in Eighteenth Century West Bengal', *Bengal Past & Present*, January to December 1985.

<sup>51</sup> James Grant, *Historical and Comparative Analysis of Finances in Bengal*, in W. K. Firminger, ed., *Affairs of the East India Company (The Fifth Report)*, vol. II, (rpt. New Delhi, 1984), pp. 205–31.

<sup>52</sup> W. K. Firminger, 'Historical Introduction to the Bengal portion of the Fifth Report', (Calcutta, 1917; reprinted Calcutta, 1962), pp. 50–1.

<sup>53</sup> Buchanan-Hamilton, pp. 252–3.

the peasants themselves took the initiative in paying extra amounts to salvage the prestige of zamindaris in crisis.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, many zamindars did not hesitate to levy the cess from their ryots by using the threat of force. However, they also kept up the appearance of making all these impositions look like voluntary gifts from the peasants. They actually described these dues, in their local languages, as *bhiksha* or *mangan* (kinds of beggary) by the landlord from his subjects.<sup>55</sup>

Various other cases show the involvement of headmen or prosperous ryots in the collection of abwabs. On the occasion of a visit of a new zamindar to his estate, it was often these 'big' ryots who collected dues from the poorer ryots and offered *nazar* to the new master. In lieu of their services they received *siropa* and concessions. The collection of abwabs often became a source of income and of authority for the bigger ryots.<sup>56</sup> However, in all these attempts there was a notion of justice grown out of custom, experience, historical dispute and the actual agrarian situation of the area. Excessive collection or continuous imposition of the new abwabs or mathots might well lead to an explosive situation like the *dhang* (revolt) against Deby Singh in Rungpur in 1783. This point was stressed in a petition from the zamindars of Rungpur which underscores the role of custom in agrarian disputes:

The ryots of this country objected to engaging for any certain quantity of land and to the revenue being fixed, on account of its being contrary to the custom of country and the lands never having been measured according to *ruckba bandi*, they paying revenue only according to the quantity of land actually cultivated by them after deducting *moorjaee* of a certain part remitted to them as an engagement. . . If the settlement be not made with them according to the established custom of the country, they desert. . . If the *bundabast* be not concluded agreeably to the customs of the country, the collections will be endangered.<sup>57</sup>

When there were agrarian disturbances in Baharband against the zamindar of Kantanagar, the peasants, the zamindar and the govern-

<sup>54</sup> T. Sisson, Judge & Magistrate of Rangpur, to Bayly, 2 April 1815, para 35. Report of Mcleod on crime, 30 September 1817, paras 45–7, in E. G. Glazier, *Further Notes on Rungpore Records*, vol. 2 (Calcutta, 1876), Appendix A, nos. 31–2.

<sup>55</sup> T. Sisson, para 29.

<sup>56</sup> Buchanan-Hamilton, p. 236. J. H. Harrington's report to Charles Stewart on Pargana Swaruppore, 20 March 1790, BR, 22 March 1790, Proc. No. 14/5, WBSA.

<sup>57</sup> Petition of the zamindars of Rungpur to Mr Purling, 1197, 1st of Aghoon ss, in Glazier (1876), Appendix G.

ment alike referred to *kanoon* and *raj-ul-mulk* as the basis for their action.<sup>58</sup> What constituted the particular *kanoon* in question was ultimately decided through a process of struggle. The willingness or reluctance to pay abwab or to allow the landlord to measure the area under cultivation depended on the economic logic as well as the power equation as it existed between the landlord, the big ryots and the lesser peasants. Specific instances of deference and defiance in such matters were determined by the specific context. But there was no legally defined limit to how much the landlord could demand of the peasant: there was nothing written or definitive about it. It was kept vague and judged by the nebulous boundaries of 'custom': landlords and cultivators had each their own interpretation of *kanoon*. In some cases the payment of mathot or abwab was a compromise between two contending groups; in other cases it was a forced exaction but taken in the name of some freshly invented tradition; in still other cases it was paid voluntarily, owing to a kind of attachment that the peasant felt towards the overlord—a notion of duty to a landlord rightly or wrongly perceived to be in need of such service.

Abwabs became a contentious issue with the zamindari family of Kasimbazar. The case of Krishna Kanta Nandi, the *bania* of Warren Hastings, was typical. Through political connections, manipulations of *izara* contracts and *benami* transactions, Krishna Kanta, starting in 1764, slowly built up his extensive landed property all over Bengal. He defeated Rani Bhawani in a series of legal and political games and consolidated his position in Dinajpur by buying the two most prosperous and contiguous parganas of Baharband and Bhitarband in Rangpur.<sup>59</sup> Thus came into being the zamindari of Kantanagar, with 'an illegitimate origin in the obscure depths of eighteenth century politics and intrigues'.<sup>60</sup> After the death of Krishna Kanta's son, Lokenath Nandi, the zamindari came under the management of the Court of Wards from 1804 to 1820, during the minority of Harinath Nandi. Harinath Nandi was involved in a prolonged law-suit with his relatives and died shortly. Due to the minority of Krishna Nath Nandi the Court of Wards took charge of

<sup>58</sup> A petition from Zemindar of Baharband, Lokenath Nandi, BR, 16 June, 1786, no. 30. Comm. of Revenue, 3rd April 1786, Proc. no. 44 and 48, WBSA.

<sup>59</sup> Somendra Chandra Nandy, *Life and times of Cattoo Baboo*, vol. 1 (Calcutta, 1978), chapter II and chapter IV, vol. II (Calcutta, 1981).

<sup>60</sup> Bell, p. 73, para 55.

the zamindari again in 1832 and administered it till 1840. The amlahs and managers who ran the administration on behalf of the Court of Wards also shared in the spoils, becoming izaradars themselves. The zamindari house was vertically split due to an unsavoury tussle between Krishna Nath Nandi and his advisers on one side, and Rani Susarmayi and Rani Hara Sundari, his mother and grandmother, on the other.<sup>61</sup> Due to two parallel administrations and 'uncontrolled gatherings of the *Muffassil Umlahs*', the condition of the ryots became worse and the income of the estate fell.<sup>62</sup> Even when Krishna Nath finally became zamindar in 1840, the situation did not much improve because of his intemperate behaviour and reckless administration. Finally, in the face of a charge of wilful murder, he committed suicide in 1844.

Thus there was no dearth of tension and conflict in this so-called peaceful district. The colonial government failed to recognize this reality because of its limited view; Manulla, however, did not fail to mention some of these events. *Kantanama* is intended to interpret rajdharma as well as to chronicle some of the events that marked the rule of the zamindars of the Kasimbazar house.

#### *IV. Rajdharma: The Face of Terror*

One important source of rajdharma lies in terror and coercion. Manulla never forgot that he was a ryot, a subject, or that the Nandis were the zamindars. God had appeared in his dream and asked him to write the text, but as soon as he woke up he worried: 'I am terribly afraid to write about the exploits of the King. Who knows, the King may dislike it. After all I am a subject and he is the King. He might be a sinner [i.e. one who ignores the words of God] and develop a dislike for me.'<sup>63</sup> Manulla repeatedly reminds himself and his reader that he would not have written his book at his own initiative: 'Helpless, I have to write down the words of God'...

The faith wavers,  
my mind is impure,  
I am narrating the deeds of the King,  
As I have seen them in a dream,

<sup>61</sup> S. C. Nandy, *History of the Cassimbazar Raj in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1 (Calcutta, 1986), chapter vi.

<sup>62</sup> J. W. Steer, 30 December 1835, BRW, January 1836, no. 30, para 30, WBSA.

<sup>63</sup> KN, pp. 13–14.

... it is with great fear that I write,  
I am terribly afraid.<sup>64</sup>

'It is with great fear that I write' is a sentence that recurs often in the first half of the poem. Manulla was also aware of the distance between the ruler and ruled: 'will the King understand my suffering? He will recognize his own work, but will he understand my pain [grief]?'<sup>65</sup> Thus his praise and eulogy of the 'king' or landlord, all his protestations of loyalty and devotion, are evoked at least in part by fear of the zamindar's power. In all the praise addressed to the overlord terror is the mark by which the subordinate differentiates himself from the superordinate, the expression of a cosmic helplessness by the author offering testimony of his very material, earthly terror.

The terrorizing power of the landlord is of course the subject of many volumes by colonial observers. Even in the remote area of Dinajpur an official wrote—

Every village, has, it is true, an Officer attached to it called a *Kotwal*. . . Besides the *Kotwals*, the landholders entertain the *pykes*, but these men never quite reach the threshold of the zamindar's *sudder cutchery* during the night, and their duties by day are confined to seizing the *ryots* and committing all sorts of violence under the orders of their masters in the prosecution of most objectionable extortions and most cruel oppression. . . The proportion of *pyke* entertained by the zamindar averages about one per village. . . If a zamindar has twenty villages, he has but one *cutchery*; at the break of day he sends forth his twenty *paiks* to levy his rents, who towards the close of the day, return with the sums they may have collected, bringing also with them, all such, as either may not have been able to meet suddenness of the demand, or who may have had courage enough to dispute the justness of the claim. This is the sum of the *pyke*'s 'duty'.<sup>66</sup>

Buchanan-Hamilton also gives a detailed description of the elaborate establishments by which the zamindar extorted rents and coerced defiant peasants. He comments in particular upon the power and authority of zamindari amlah necessary in Kantanagar.<sup>67</sup> On the same subject, Manulla says:

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 17

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 15

<sup>66</sup> T. Sisson, Magistrate Dinajpur to G. Dowdeswell, 11 July 1814, Judl-Criminal, 19 Aug. 1815, no. 1, paras 2 to 4, WBSA.

<sup>67</sup> Buchanan-Hamilton, p. 252; S. C. Nandy (1986), vol. 1, pp. 44 and 22.

like the moon of the heaven sitting along with his stars, the zamindar sits with his amlahs. . . He has a canopy over his head. . . The Chief Diwan is Herkolots sahib. . . The chief Nazir is Gangadhar Ghose, a name dear to god. . . Durgacharan Babu is the head of the Cutchery, he is sheristadar of the King. . . Everybody is in his place, the king in his darbar, the whole Sabha is radiant.<sup>68</sup>

A peasant like Manulla, however prosperous, had to take cognizance of the power of this establishment, and deify it. This ritualized description, suggestive of a cosmology and a divine plan revealing itself in the physical arrangement of the royal court, was perhaps part of the strategy the peasant used to adjust himself to zamindari power. Subordination seems almost desirable by such a glorification of the source of oppression.

The capacity to punish has always been a signifier of royalty. It is through the exercise of such power (*danda*) that the king preserves the moral order of dharma. From the Manusamhita to the Mahabharata to the localised Puranas in medieval Bengal, the terrorizing power of rajdharma or *danda* is described in exalted terms.<sup>69</sup> In a typical passage of the Mahabharata Arjuna, the legendary hero, says this of *danda*: 'Oh King, Danda protects and rules the subjects. Even when everybody sleeps, Danda remains awake. The wise have described Danda as the principal dharma [*dandam dharmam bidurbhudha*]. Most sinners do not commit crimes for fear of *rajdanda*. It is the natural law of this world: Danda is the foundation of everything [*ebam samsidhiki loke sarvam danda pratisthitam*]'<sup>70</sup> As we can see from this, in the marga tradition *danda* is fused with moral order. Disruption and withdrawal of *danda* mean the breakdown of social order, crisis in caste society, even a total reversal of the existing patterns of domination and subordination. Everybody is within the pale of *danda*, no subject is beyond it. The exercise of *danda* is natural and good, its suspension unnatural and bad. *Danda* and dharma thus became synonymous, *dandam dharmam bidurbhudha*. This type of identity places rajdharma in

<sup>68</sup> KN, pp. 83–5.

<sup>69</sup> Kaliprasanna Sinha, trans., *Mahabharat* (Bengali), Santi Parva (Basumatı edition), pp. 245, 253, 259, *The Mahabharatam* (Sanskrit, Arya Sastra edition), p. 5999 (138 SL), p. 6022 (16 SL), p. 6037 (104 SL); Bhutnath Suptatirtha, ed. and trans., *Manusmitir Medhatithi Bhasya* (Calcutta, 1361 bs), pp. 633–8, sl. no. 17–25. Panchanan Tarka Ratna, ed. and trans., 'Brihat Dharma Puranam', Uttar Khanda, third part, sl. no. 13–19.

<sup>70</sup> Kaliprasanna Sinha, chapter 15, pp. 182–3, *The Mahabharatam*, p. 5846, sl. no. 6.

the dual world of morality and terror, the one associated with the other in such a manner that it becomes impossible to draw a boundary between them.<sup>71</sup>

This picture is present in the *Kantanama* but with a difference. We do not have the speech of heroes like Arjuna or Bhisma; rather, the peasant, the subject of terror, is given speech. The exercise of terror by the king is explained and depicted in the *Kantanama* through the behaviour of the peasant, the object of danda rather than one who wields it.

The story begins with the terrorized subject. Krishna Kanta establishes his zamindari and his rule: 'Kantababu became the King in the year seventy-two, he was declared the zamindar in [BS] 1772. God has favoured him. . . the two annas of the area has been given in the name of Kantababu. The Maharaja circulated his *parwana* throughout his *bhum* or area and named the Pargana Kantanagar after his own name.'

In this way Manulla describes the establishment of a new zamindari, the exercise of a new power through the parwanas, through the measure of renaming an old place. The success of the landlord showed he had the support of god because of the good deeds of his previous lives. If success was a reward for the inherent goodness and merit in a man, Kantababu, who had been able to establish his order (*dohai*) in this area, naturally deserved to be respected: 'The pargana belongs to Kantababu. It bears his name. All the subjects recognise that and salute him.' Again, 'Kantababu became the ruler of the *Dowani* pargana. He has found it easy to collect rents from this area.'

Kantababu, however, following the proper norms, did not go beyond the limit imposed by *insaf* (justice): 'He never demands abwab. All the subjects (praja) live in great happiness.'<sup>72</sup> But there are erring prajas, people incapable of understanding the goodness of Dharmaraj Kantababu. They are bad and defiant subjects, while Manulla himself, by implication, conforms to the ideal: 'The Raja has got a kingdom (*mulk*). Its name is Baharband. The story of this

<sup>71</sup> On rajdharma and danda see Jan Gonda, *Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View* (Leiden, 1966); Charles Drekmeir, *Kingship and Community in Early India* (California, 1962); J. C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition* (Delhi, 1985). I am most indebted to the classic work of P. V. Kane, *History of Dharma-Sastras*, vol. III (Poona, 1946), pp. 3–6.

<sup>72</sup> KN, p. 28.

area is puzzling (*dhandha*). The country is wicked, its people are wicked. There, no one pays rent, no one accepts authority.<sup>73</sup>

The area of Baharband, even according to the official documents, was well known for its recursive tradition of rebellion. Mirkashim as well as Rani Bhawani of Natore had had their times of trouble in this pargana. When Krishna Kanta Nandi purchased the estate *benami* (in a fictitious name) on account of his influence over Hastings, he wanted to make his holdings lucrative by introducing 'scientific administration'. At this the dominant and prosperous khudkasht ryots of the area were up in arms. In a petition to the Company they talked of their customary rights, referred to the earlier history of the pargana where 'bad' zamindars were often taught a lesson, and spoke in favour of 'their ancient settlements' and 'Raj-ul-Mulk.' The zamindar, Lokenath Nandi, son of Krishna Kanta, gave his own interpretation. He upheld 'the universal law of empire' as well as the absolute authority of the landlord over his ryots. He also rejected the complaints as a conspiracy of the big ryots to disguise the actual area of land under their own cultivation from proper measurement, and to shift the burden of the rent on the poor ryots. Failure in effecting a compromise led to a revolt of these 'artful ryots' under the command of Hargovind Bakshi, Mohan Bakshi and Maniram Hazra.<sup>74</sup> Forces led by Goodlad, the collector of Rungpur, eventually crushed the rebellion on behalf of Kasimbasar raj.<sup>75</sup>

It is to this incident that Manulla alludes in his poem. His aim was to represent rajdharma. Baharband was a place where lived the wicked subjects—as opposed to good and loyal subjects elsewhere. Their rebellion arose not out of their misery and poverty or a sense of acute oppression, but on account of their wicked nature, of their innate desire to defy all authority. They were rich enough to possess elephants, yet they refused to pay because 'it is a wicked [*khal*]

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>74</sup> All the descriptions and quotations are taken from translations of a representation from the ryots of Baharband; translation of the answer of Lokenath Nandy; the humble petition of Lokenath Nandy, Zamindar of Baharband, Committee of Revenue, 3 April 1786, Proc. no. 49. Also see 'Particulars of the Reasons for Hutabood in 1189 BS', BR, 16 June 1786, Proc. No 30 WBSA. For the early history of the pargana, see E. G. Glazier, *A report on the Dist. of Rungpore* (Calcutta, 1873), pp. 27–8, p. 84; Glazier, *Further Notes*, Appendix C.

<sup>75</sup> Nikhil Nath Roy, *Murshidabad Kahini* (1903 reprint, Calcutta, 1978), pp. 271–2.

kingdom, its subjects are also wicked.'—and—'They do not accept the King and do not pay the revenue. In an organised way, they forbade everybody to pay revenue. They know nothing better than to cause trouble. They said to the Raja: We do not recognise you.'

Kanta Babu himself went to the pargana with his army, with the result that the ryots retreated and went into hiding:

The King sent summons to the subjects. From a distant place, they sent back their reply: We do not recognize you and we will not pay any revenue. Return to your own house for your own benefit [safety]. If you apply much pressure, the consequence may be worse. Then you will not be allowed to return to your house [country] alive.

In the eyes of Manulla, the king ought to be patient and kind-hearted: 'Even after hearing this, the king refused to be angry. He feels compassion towards his subjects.' But his entreaties were repeatedly met with defiance. Ultimately, however, finding them to be 'compulsive trouble-mongers', and having lived without provisions for twenty days, the king's patience ran out. He now gave a fitting reply to the strength of the organized peasantry, a reply known to everybody through the ages.

Failing to get hold of any of the subjects,  
the king turned furious and set fire [to the villages].  
All the houses in the country were destroyed by fire.  
The prajas received what they deserved.  
One and all were punished in the right measure,  
The rent for three years being collected all at once.  
The king's authority was proclaimed all over the country.  
Pacified, the prajas returned to their houses.

The burning of houses, the beating of people, the taking of all rents due in a single instalment were the outcome of the exercise of danda. In Manulla's opinion this was the only recourse open to Kanta Babu. If his subjects refused to obey they transgressed the limits of prajadharma and violated the code of behaviour sanctioned to subjects. In order to rectify this lapse the exercise of legal power was necessary, for without danda the bad praja cannot be restored to the right path. To establish authority is the beginning of rajdharma and to punish the subject who deviates from his own dharma is its sacred duty. In the last resort through the exercise of terror, danda, prajadharma was restored. Rajdharma's quality had thus been fully vindicated.

Without objection, they accepted the King's judgement  
 [and] paid rent, including cess on grazing land.  
 The King, kindness personified, felt sorry for the subjects  
 In justice [insaf] he relinquished the cess for ever.  
 It is thus that he collected the revenue,  
 And named the pargana Kantanagar after himself.  
 The Pargana is Kantanagar,  
 And the King is called Kantababu  
 The Prajas all accept this  
 and salute the king.

He who did not understand the glory and significance of rajdharna is, according to Manulla, 'a thoroughbred savage'.<sup>76</sup>

Refusal to be terrorized by danda is equally a crime, for the danda of the king is not arbitrary or blind. Krishna Kanta gave his subjects the chance to correct themselves, he condoned their initial defiance. His exercise of power was tempered by kindness, limited by justice or insaf. Hence, Manulla suggests that while the use of terror and coercion was legitimate and the ideal praja was expected to fear the king's power, the king too had the moral right to coerce only so long as the exercise of royal power was moored in the notion of insaf or justice.

#### *V. Limits to Rajdharma: The Nature of Insaf*

The institution of abwab illustrates well the notion of insaf as it was actually practised. In the day-to-day existence of zamindari, the regular payment of rent is a point around which the relation between a landlord and his peasants revolves. To collect rent is the right of the zamindar and, in the opinion of Manulla, the peasants are duty-bound to pay. But to measure the land, to collect revenue and then to ask for abwab and mathot are, according to him, clear instances of oppression, be-insaf, *zulm*. We have seen how the issue of land-measurement *vis-à-vis* the collection of abwabs became a bone of contention between landlords and the substantial peasantry in Dinajpur and Rangpur in the early nineteenth century. In the late eighteenth century Lokenath Nandi rejected the demand of his khudkasht ryots who opposed measurement and instead offered a cess as compensation. The powerful ryots of Baharband and Gayabari fought the zamindars successfully for the most part of the

<sup>76</sup> All these are taken from KN, pp. 30-3.

nineteenth century, till they were defeated by Rani Swarnamayi. However, in other areas the khudkasht ryots were not so powerful; they lost ground on the issue of land measurement. Hence, the collection of abwabs gradually became a contentious issue. It is interesting to observe that Manulla's discussion of abwabs is significantly different in tone and content from his discussion of danda. The collection of abwabs involved the practice of insaf, and here Manulla often sees the zamindar as the offender. After praising Nal, Harischandra, Karna, Bali and Yuddhisthir, all well-known mythological kings, Manulla introduces a king called Srischandra, his own creation: 'Srischandra was a king and a great archer. . . No one was able to match him. . . He passed his days happily [until] he became the victim of a bad intention after a long period.' What was this bad intention? He began to take mathot for the *annaprasan* ceremony of his son, for mortuary rites in connection with his father's death and for the marriage ceremony of his son. As a consequence, 'God became angry with him, the peasants suffered much for the payment of abwab. God with his own hands made the King a sinner.'<sup>77</sup> Srischandra's name cannot be found in any purana and he is clearly created as a counter-image of good kings like Bali, Nal and Yudhisthir. To collect mathot on all these ceremonies was clearly an act of oppression. Using the structure of puranic tales, Manulla depicts the imagined experience of an oppressive landlord. At the same time he places Krishna Kanta and his successors within that puranic tradition.

Kanta Babu followed the rules of rajdharma because 'he does not even utter the word abwab, he is dharmaraj [himself]'. Under the reign of his son Lokenath the subjects were very happy because 'he never oppressed anyone in the name of abwab'.<sup>78</sup> Krishna Nath also belonged to the same category. Yuddhisthir in the Mahabharata, too, belongs to the same tradition: 'Yuddhisthir was famous in this world for his truthfulness. He never uttered the word abwab'.<sup>79</sup> There was, obviously, no discussion of abwabs in the Mahabharata, but Manulla's Yuddhisthir is made in the image of a just zamindar at Dinajpur, the sign of that insaf being not collecting illegal cess and abwabs from peasants.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 21-3.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-4.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

Manulla is not unique in pursuing this theme. It is also present in the ballads of Mainamati and Gopichandra, so popular with illiterate Muslim peasants, weavers, and the Yugis, agricultural labourers and lime-makers of north Bengal. Through the work of Sukur Muhammad, Manulla was familiar with these stories. In the kingdom of Manikchandra, 'the great righteous king', the tax was levied per plough and everybody was prosperous. The images of prosperity in these stories are identical with those used by Manulla to describe the Baharband ryots. It was the bad amlah, usually an outsider, who urged the raja to extract abwabs. The condition of the whole estate deteriorated, and the ryots appealed to god who advised them to curse the king. 'The King became greedy for wealth [*dhana-kangali*]. Dharma Niranjan would judge it.' Ultimately, the half-naked peasants wished death on him and thus caused his death. Throughout this ballad of Manikchandra the anger against the *dhana-kangali* (greedy) king reverberates like an echo.<sup>80</sup> On this point Manulla is close to Gopichandrer *git* rather than to any *sastric* literature.

In Manulla's *Kantanama* this oppression has been perpetrated by the officials of the zamindar. Their presence was immediate and real to the peasantry; the landlords were far away—in Kasimbazar and Calcutta. In the *mahals* the amlahs were all in all. During the king's minority and management by the Court of Wards, their oppression increased.<sup>81</sup> Manulla gives a typical description of the situation during the period of the minor Raja Harinath. His description may be paraphrased thus: The amlahs collected money from the ryots but showed it as their own borrowings from the latter and thus the estate became a defaulter in the eyes of the government. 'They gave a bad name to the ryots', says Manulla, 'and became *izaradars* [themselves]. Inflicting lossess on the king, i.e., the treasury, they laid the blame at the door of the ryots. They pleased the king by promising *daul* and obtained their *izara* at the court. Returning to the country, they ruined the pargana.' According to Manulla, they imposed cesses under various names, such as bandobust, *daul*, milani, etc. The pargana was plunged deep into chaos.

Manulla's descriptions are amply confirmed by official docu-

<sup>80</sup> Ashutosh Bhattacharya, ed., *Gopichandrer Gan* (Calcutta University, 1965), pp. 1–6.

<sup>81</sup> KN, p. 37. Cf. Anderson to J. P. Wards, Bankura 13 May 1816, BRW, 31 May 1816, no. 30; S. C. Nandy (1986), vol. 1, pp. 45–6.

ments. Izaradar oppression was, perhaps, even greater. During the time of the minority of Krishna Nath the izaradar had hold of the pargana; as Manulla puts it: 'Krishna Nath, being a minor, was innocent [of the affairs of the estate]. The Sahibs now became the *mukhiyars* [representatives] for the king [and] Shamkishore made arrangements in the collectorate [for the izara].'<sup>82</sup> According to official documents, Shyamkishore was an active patron of a faction of local amlahs and was 'a man of business [who was] well acquainted with and engages in speculations'.<sup>83</sup> He was a typical product of the permanent settlement, a relentless pursuer of profit from rent and speculation in land. Manulla gives an eloquent description of this man and his activities:

He speaks only the language of violence. Nobody dares to speak in his presence. Summons came [from him] declaring all current rents as arrears. It was as if the Pargana trembled [in fear]. The order from the Collectorate was for the arrears to be paid within three years. But he [Shyamkishore] collected it all in three months. Varieties of abwabs he took from the ryots. He sold their jewellery, even their pots and pans. He respects nothing, not even *hurumat* [honour].<sup>84</sup>

The izaradar did not respect custom, cared nothing for natural calamity, and the invocation of izzat or hurumat cut no ice with him. Eventually the peasants ran away:

No water, no cultivation  
no prosperity in the household.  
The izaradar still exacts his dues under so many pretexts.  
The people desert and flee from the pargana.

This was a part of 'normal' life for the peasantry. There was nothing unusual about their having to sell their essentials in order to meet the excess demands of rapacious farmers and the agents of zamindars. Desertion was quite common too. In the songs of Gopichandra the singer says: 'The peasants sell their ploughs, their yoke and all their agricultural implements to meet the demand of rent; they even sell their own infants.'<sup>85</sup>

Their actual experience of amlahs and izaradars made the peasants despise immediate authority and created in them the expectation of

<sup>82</sup> KN, p. 77.

<sup>83</sup> S. C. Nandy (1986), pp. 173–4; BRW, May 1836, no. 48, WBSA.

<sup>84</sup> KN, p. 78.

<sup>85</sup> *Gopichandrer Gan*, p. 2.

justice from a higher, distant authority.<sup>86</sup> Manulla makes this distinction throughout his writing: amlahs and izaradars are not synonymous with the king but are his (bad) agents because they do not conform to the dictates of honour or hurumat. What was the way out of this misery? 'Prayer' is Manulla's considered answer. 'Those of us who cannot escape, think of God. How long before the king ascends the throne? Let the king grow up and take charge of the kingdom: this is what we, the subjects, pray for.'<sup>87</sup>

But why is the king necessarily more just, more responsible and kinder than the izaradar and the amlah? To answer this question Manulla postulated a general principle that was central to his notion of rajdharma. To take abwab or not, to be generous or not, to obey the preceptor (guru) or not—these were merely outward expressions of a general principle of dharma. They were the specific signs of a general principle, and there could be numerous variations on these signs in a specific situation. Manulla explains the point:

Like a father the king looks after his kingdom with care and attention.

Others oppress with injustice for they know not any kindness.  
Without the father the son becomes helpless like the destitute [kangal] from Nadia,

An orphan, he has no one to turn to.

Likewise, the praja is the son

And the raja the father.

[If] The father leaves his ward [praja]

The praja becomes miserable.

The father is both a preceptor and a friend

Know it for sure then

[that] the father is the God Niranjan himself

...

The raja is for the praja as father is to son

Who else would value the praja as a son.<sup>88</sup>

The crucial feature of rajdharma is this relationship of father and son, through which is viewed the relationship between the king and his subject. It is a relationship, in colloquial language, of 'ma-baap'.<sup>89</sup> The father punishes and also looks after his son. This duality

<sup>86</sup> The Arzee of the ryots of Purgunnah Lushkerpore, Proc. of the Provincial Council of the Revenue, Murshidabad, 26 June 1775. The petition of the ryots, Par-gana Silberry, *ibid.*, 9 October 1779, WBSA.

<sup>87</sup> KN, pp. 35–7, 77–8.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'On Deifying and Defying Authority—managers and

of chastisement and protection is the basis of rajdharma. The authority of the father and the submission of the son are matched by the helplessness of the son in the absence of the father. Manulla cites one example after another from the puranas in support of his theory. Nal, Bali, Karna and Yudhisthir were all rewarded in heaven precisely because they had conducted themselves in accordance with this ideal of rajdharma: ‘They looked after their subjects as sons [*putra bhave palan kaila*].’<sup>90</sup> Conversely, Srishchandra was rebuked by the messengers of Yama in hell for not behaving in a fatherly way towards his subjects.<sup>91</sup>

All the zamindars of the Kasimbazar raj were made (by Manulla) in the model of these mythical heroes—their exact replicas. They treated their subjects as their own sons.<sup>92</sup> In this way, the puranic kings and the zamindars of the Nandi family all became instances of dharmaraj and a puranic framework of time could be superimposed on a chronology that was local and specific. In the Mahabharata and the puranas the same ideas and epithets are expressed to explain rajdharma as the relation between ruler and ruled.<sup>93</sup> In the Bhagavat, it has been said, the prajas, being sons, were even entitled to offer pindas after the death of the king. They remain before the king as ‘children before a father.’<sup>94</sup>

In this notion there was a fusion of the two opposing ideas of dominance and subordination. In the consciousness of the peasant the king or the lord was duty-bound to look after him. The authority of the father in a family is taken as ‘given’ or ‘natural’; so the lord’s authority over his domain, by this analogy, becomes ‘natural’ and ‘everlasting’. This analogy from family to society and from society to the state comprehends various levels of authority and

workers in the jute mills of Bengal 1890–1940’, *Past and Present*, number 100, pp. 130–2. It must be noted, however, that in the colonial situation this certainly had undergone some distortions where coercion was probably more pronounced than protection.

<sup>90</sup> KN, pp. 19–20.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., pp. 33, 38, 106.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. *Mahabharat*, Santi Parva, 87th chapter, p. 281. The *Brahmavaivarta Puranam*, Mathuranath Tarkaratna, ed. and trans. 90th Chapter, Srikrishna Janmakanda, SL. 6 (Calcutta, 1881–5); *Brihatdharma Puranam*, Uttara Khanda, 3rd chapter, SL. 11.

<sup>94</sup> Taranath Kavyatirtha, ed. and trans., *The Srimat Bhagavat* (Calcutta, 1373 BS), 1st skanda, 11th chapter, and 4th skanda, 21st chapter, pp. 282, 283.

submission and makes these part of a whole order. Hence a particular landlord or king could be bad but monarchy and landlordism were part of a 'good and beneficial' arrangement. The king had certain duties towards the peasant, not as a part of the legal rights of the peasant but derived from a general moral and social order. The peasant had duties towards the king. Everybody in this hierarchical order accepts the chains of duty and moral obligation.

This was not just a figment of Manulla's imagination. We encounter the same theme in a petition that Rani Bhawani made to the East India Company against her izaradar in 1775:

I am an old zamindar and not being able to see the griefs of my ryots, I agreed to take the country as farmer... The high ground of Rarh yielded nothing for want of water and in Bhaturia, which is very low, the gentlemen [the officials of the company] took the *poolbandi* into their own hands and made the banks and in August 1773, the banks broke and the ryots' ground and their crops failed by being overflowed with water. I am a zamindar, so was obliged to keep the ryots from ruin and gave what ease to them I could by giving them time to make up their payments and requested the gentlemen would in same manner give me time when I would pay up the revenues but not crediting me, they were pleased to employ Dulal Roy as *Sezawal*... The two men [Dulal Roy and Paran Bose]... have depopulated and destroyed the country. I am an old zamindar. I hope I have committed no fault. My country is plundered and the ryots are full of complaints... For this reason I am ready [to offer the same amount] and will take care that the sircar suffers no loss.<sup>95</sup>

It is irrelevant to ask here whether the rani's sentiments were genuine or not. The language of the petition and what she has to say of her duty as an old zamindar are what interest us. In the history of Dinajpur raj, too, an anecdote expressing a similar kind of mutual responsibility between the landlord and his subjects has been reported. When Raja Radhanath was faced with the prospect of bankruptcy the headmen of all the villages sought a meeting with the 'king' to work out an arrangement whereby they could assist the landlord in this time of crisis. The king agreed, pitched a tent, arranged a 'solemn ceremony', and dressed himself accordingly. The ceremony was in the end cancelled as certain amlahs did not favour the idea, but the anecdote reflects the notion of mutuality of

<sup>95</sup> Petition by Rani Bhavani, March 1775, quoted in A. B. M. Mahmood, *Revenue Administration of Northern Bengal* (Dacca, 1970), pp. 84–5.

duties between the ruler and the ruled.<sup>96</sup> As a famous passage in the Mahabharata puts it: ‘The first body of the subject is the king, the subject is also like the body of the king. Without the king, there is no country, without the country there is no king.’<sup>97</sup>

Thus, by relating the day-to-day experiences of the peasant to the traditions of the *smritis*, the puranas and the sayings of wise men, Manulla transforms the mundane into the heavenly, the natural into the supernatural. The personal and historical experiences of Manulla thus become generalized beyond his immediate space and time.<sup>98</sup>

#### *VI. Transgression of Rajdharma: The Story of Harinath*

Manulla also speaks of a rajdharma that might be interfered with by the ruler himself, and the consequences that followed. Those who ruled according to rajdharma went to baikuntha (the abode of Hari, heaven) and those who violated his norms went to narak (hell): ‘If you do good, your place will be in baikuntha. If you do otherwise, you will be sent to narak.’ There is a clear distinction between the worlds of dharma and adharma, sin and merit: ‘The place in opposition to dharma is narak, the kingdom of Yama, riven with dissension, while Niranjan, the Lord, rules over baikuntha, the abode of dharma.’<sup>99</sup> Srishchandra and Shyamkishore went to hell forever and were physically punished for their actions. From Yudhisthir to Lokenath, everybody who acted according to rajdharma was rewarded with a place in heaven.

The life of Harinath, the son of Lokenath Nandi and the father of Krishna Nath, was, however, not so simple. Harinath was a righteous king and got a son like Krishna Nath. But during the last days of his life he deviated from the principles of rajdharma. This incident is crucial for the narrative of *Kantanama* and Manulla describes the event at least twice. A peasant went to see Harinath and complained against the oppression of an izadar. Harinath listened to the complaint but gave no decision. For thirteen days the peasant waited for a royal decision but the king did not even attend his dar-

<sup>96</sup> E. V. Westmacott, ‘The Dinajpore Raj’, *Calcutta Review*, 1872, p. 223.

<sup>97</sup> *The Mahabharatam*, Santi Parva, 68th chapter, SL. no. 59.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. R. Barthes, ‘Change the object itself’, in *Image-Music-Text* (Glasgow, 1982), p. 165.

<sup>99</sup> KN, pp. 18, 55, 59.

bar. Reduced to poverty and despair, the peasant eventually managed to find the landlord sitting in his darbar. But, as Manulla says: 'The door-keeper did not allow him into the darbar. Being forbidden, he called out to the king. The king heard the cry but did not respond. . . Being a king he refused to listen to the complaints of the subject. Nor would the sentry let him [the peasant] enter. The *praja* went away, wiping his tears.' Thus Manulla brought two specific charges against Raja Harinath:

Though a raja he does not attend the darbar everyday. Also unbecoming [of a king] is the fact that he does not listen to the complaints of the *prajas*. If the *praja* has to pay for food at the royal palace, or go without it altogether, this is yet another sin that attaches to the raja.

Harinath went to baikuntha all right, but he remained there in extreme discomfiture, for 'Niranjan wrote *gunha* [sin] against the name of the righteous king.'<sup>100</sup>

No cool breeze soothes his person, which always burns [as though] from summer-heat. Restless inside, with sweat running down all over his body, he finds [the situation] unbearable. 'Oh, save me!' cries out his soul in desperation, and even though he is in Baikuntha itself, he still has to pray to God.

God eventually came in the disguise of a brahmin and explained the cause of suffering. He also said that the suffering would last forever, for it was *bemiyadi*, without any time limit. The king pleaded for remission. Showing compassion for him, God said, 'Well, only a part may be remitted. Ten annas of your sin will remain for what you have done to your *praja*. As soon as the brahmin uttered this, the king's suffering was lessened by six annas. The King now realised that this person [the brahmin] was none other than God himself.'<sup>101</sup>

*Pap* and *punya* are the two most important themes of this discussion that goes on in baikuntha between the zamindar and God in the shape of a brahmin. Yet the peasant-poet's imagination shows all the signs of the political order in which the peasant lives. Just as the king was expected to respond kindly to petitions by the peasants and occasionally reduce their burden of rent, God, in response to Harinath's petition, did the same. The relation between landlord

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-9.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., pp. 63-7.

and peasant has been replicated in baikuntha as a relation between Hari and Harinath. Similarly, the punishments meted out in hell are reminiscent of the physical torture the peasants suffer at the zamindar's establishment.<sup>102</sup>

Manulla's heaven, by contrast, overflows with various items of food. For a peasantry used to hunger and physical deprivation, it was perhaps natural that 'heaven' should represent all that was materially desirable:

Rice was served with a variety of dishes. The plates were made of gold, so were the bowls and waterpots . . . The king ate the meal with great relish—milk, curds, sweets, *khir* and butter. The meal over, the king put some betel leaves in his mouth and was offered a golden *hookah* [hubble-bubble]. He was now very pleased.<sup>103</sup>

Through this description of heaven and hell Manulla upholds the hierarchy of authority. To Niranjan every devotee is a ryot, a subject: 'It is God, the master of all living beings', he writes, 'who rules all men as his subjects and looks after them as a father.'<sup>104</sup> The landlord in fact is shown to be afraid in the presence of God. Fearing punishment, 'the king began to cry: alas I do not know what . . . calamity fate has decreed for me.'<sup>105</sup>

But the lapses in this exercise of rajdharma are temporary. Stability and order are natural. And, in Manulla's narrative, the restoration of stability comes through sacrifices made by the subject. Harinath committed lapses because of his bad behaviour with his praja; he suffered for that. His exculpation comes when God asks an ordinary praja, Manulla, to relate to others the story of the dynasty to which Harinath belongs. But in order to qualify for this noble task that God has entrusted, Manulla had to pass the test of suffering and thus lost everything—his family, sons and his houses.

The king's thought turned to the writer and the sufferings he had borne in order to document royal deeds. . . 'in narrating to the world, the exploits of my dynasty [the king said], my subject has sacrificed his father and sons. For my exploits the writer suffers.' Thus the king laments

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., pp. 23–4, for a description of *narak* or hell. For similar descriptions of punishment for a revenue defaulter in the nawab's establishment see, 'Madan Pala', quoted in Sukumar Sen, p. 487; for torture in the zamindar's establishment, G. C. Dass, *Report on the statistics of Rungpore for the year 1872–73* (Calcutta, 1874).

<sup>103</sup> KN, pp. 62–3.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

over the misfortune of the subject... ‘Our exploits have been propagated in this world. For that my subject has lost his sons and brothers.’<sup>106</sup>

But Manulla is duty-bound to do this; any subject is duty-bound to help his lord in times of distress. As God says to Manulla: ‘Do the work in the interest of the king. You can be sure that your work would be everlasting.’<sup>107</sup>

Thus the initiative of the subject is recognized, but in favour of the lord, not against him. Manulla is here a successor of Kalu Dom, a model in medieval Bengali literature of old, trustworthy servants. Kalu sacrificed his life and made Lau Sen, his overlord, victorious in a battle. Manulla’s worldly sufferings are given a similar meaning: it is because he passes the test of suffering that he qualifies to write the history of the raj. This alone can reduce the king’s sufferings in hell. Manulla’s sacrifices show his loyalty to the king and to the divine order that kingship represents. It was also, one might say, a clever, if unconscious, ploy to ensure that his sufferings were after all not in vain, that they brought him adequate rewards from the royal court. We do not know if the strategy worked.

## *VII. God, the King and the Subject: The Question of Submission and Autonomy*

In *Kantanama* God—the king or the landlord, and the subject—or Manulla, interact in a manner that deserves to be treated separately. Manulla wished to please the landlord, so he wrote about the deeds of his family. But the text is not simply supplicatory in tone. In the first place, Manulla wasn’t even sure that the text would please Krishna Nath Nandi. What if it only aroused his anger? The fear of a negative reaction terrorized Manulla so much that to bolster his self-confidence he often invoked god’s support. God’s authority is superior to that of the landlord. It is interesting to note Manulla’s strategy for self-protection. It speaks of the fear that even a subject who is praising the landlord feels. But in this imagined, hierarchical community, one’s superiors also had their superiors, and one could always appeal to—or in the name of—the higher authority.

And this gives Manulla a voice of his own, a certain degree of

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 90–1.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

autonomy even when he is submissive. It is interesting that he manages even to abuse the very landlord whom he was supposed to please. If the landlord dared to treat him badly because he did not like Manulla's poem, he would show himself up as a 'mean' person (*pamar*). Only a king who was a 'thoroughbred fool' (as God would say,' Manulla hastens to add) would be unable to sympathize with the heartfelt sorrow of the subject.<sup>108</sup> Thus, by counterposing the authority of God to that of the landlord, Manulla not only saved himself from the ire of the master but also issued a veiled threat to him in case his expectations were not fulfilled. Manulla in fact even goes beyond this. He makes Harinath, the landlord, suffer in baikuntha because of his lapses from dharma. His redemption is only possible through Manulla's act of writing the text, and in the narrative, Harinath is forced by God to recognize this. But again, the ultimate actor, as Manulla says, is God himself. Harinath was forced to commit lapses because Manulla was destined to write the book: 'Niranjan has confused the king because of the need to have his exploits written.'<sup>109</sup> Thus, all the acts of Manulla, according to the order of God, are not meant for his own liberation but for that of his master.

Through his act of writing Manulla was, thus, an agent of God, and was outside the pale of the landlord's judgement. His own decision was also irrelevant here. Manulla is 'entrapped in religiosity'. He has, as Marx would have said, either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. All his initiative belongs to the other world; his supplication and protest have their source in other worlds. Religion here becomes the opium of the people. But it is also, as Marx himself recognised, the sigh of the oppressed. Manulla is caught up in an endless cycle of transference: he creates a God whom he believes to be his own Creator.

Manulla is not really representative of poor, indigent peasants. He was a Mandal, a headman whose social world was that of the well-to-do peasant. How then does *Kantanama* help us to understand the culture of the subordinate classes? Is it not the mentality of the substantial ryot that *Kantanama* documents? There may have, of

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

course, been interesting and important differences between the thoughts of a poor peasant and those of a Mandal, and we cannot make *Kantanama* stand in as a substitute for evidence reflecting more directly the thought-world, say, of a share-cropper or a landless labourer. However, it seems to me that we would be erring in the opposite direction to think that there could be no exchange or sharing of ideals or ideas between classes, or that classes, even when they were in conflict, did not learn from each other. There is, *prima facie*, no reason to assume that classes, like scholars, are deaf to each other, that ideas cannot travel across the boundaries of class. The cognitive map that Manulla had of the world may easily have been shared, though not necessarily wholly, by a poor peasant.

There is yet another reason why Manulla's text may be thought to have a general significance. If we were to think of subordination not as a static and fixed property of particular classes but as a process and a relationship, which people could enter into or reproduce in different contexts of hierarchy, the relevance of Manulla's text becomes apparent. In his statement we begin to see the different elements in the cultural repertoire of rural Bengal that are marshalled and arranged in order to communicate to his masters his feelings of loyalty and submission. Hence, Manulla's text is of interest to us not simply because it allows us to see a particular form in which a peasant may try to present his view of rajdharma to his landlord in order to get material benefit as well as merit. What makes the text rich are its contradictions and ambiguities—the fact that a text ostensibly written to please the landlord should carry within it its own moments of irony, fear, resistance and resentment.

From recent researches it can be shown that, time and again, the subordinate classes have risen in rebellion because of their faith in some moral order, out of an urge to restore justice. Rajdharma can be seen to have played a similar role. The praja recognizes his first identity as praja (subject) against the raja (as king) in terms of rajdharma. He thus becomes conscious of the marks of his distinction. This is the first step of self-recognition without which no rebellion is possible. The peasant's submission is not to a particular king or to a lord but to an universal law such as rajdharma. Even at the moment of abject submission he, in his own way, internalizes the principle of rajdharma, on whose basis he might recognize or challenge any violation of it. From the same belief-structure he can rationalize both defiance as well as submission. During the Rungpur

rebellion of 1783 peasants raised slogans against Devi Singh, saying *dine zalm kutha asht* (the religion of the oppressor is short). The religious message that teaches submission also forms the basis of rebellion. Again, at the very moment of insurrection, peasants are quite capable of accepting a theory of kingship such as *rajdhama*, while rebelling against a particular king. Thus collaboration and resistance, the two elements in the mentality of subalternity, merge and coalesce to make up a complex and contradictory consciousness. How this consciousness overcomes and transcends its contradictions is another question.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>110</sup> For specific references and detailed quotations, see the Bengali version of this article in *Anustup*, autumn number, 1987. However, essential notes and references have been cited. All the translations are mine. I am grateful to Dipesh Chakrabarty, who has thoroughly edited this paper and helped me formulate my ideas. I thank Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak for their comments.

# Feminist Fictions: A Critique of the Category 'Non-Western Woman' in Feminist Writings on India<sup>1</sup>

JULIE STEPHENS

'a feminism that cannot criticise itself cannot, in the last analysis, serve as the bearer of emancipatory possibilities...'<sup>2</sup>

## *The 'Said'*

A distinguishing feature of contemporary feminist discourse is that it purports to speak about 'real' women. It claims to record 'the direct experiences of women',<sup>3</sup> to understand 'the reality of being a woman in an Indian village',<sup>4</sup> and to examine how 'lower-class women in India really feel about being women'.<sup>5</sup> This emphasis on realness, this faith that the descriptions of Indian women it offers are unproblematic representations of the objective, separates feminism from other discourses dealing with the same subject. Feminist studies aim to present 'a vital and living portrait'<sup>6</sup> of Indian

<sup>1</sup> *Editor's Note.* This is a revised version of the author's paper presented at the Second Subaltern Studies Conference in Calcutta (January 1986). We publish it together with a comment contributed by Dr Susie Tharu at our request. It is our hope that the debate which took place at the conference on the issues raised in the paper may continue in the pages of *Subaltern Studies* and elsewhere. The concurrence of the Editorial Team with the views expressed by Stephens or Tharu may not be presumed.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, 'Feminist Discourse and its Discontents: Language, Power and Meaning', *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1982, p. 612.

<sup>3</sup> Miranda Davies (ed.), *Third World, Second Sex: Women's Struggles and National Liberation* (London, 1978), p. i.

<sup>4</sup> Doranne Jacobson, 'Studying the Changing Roles of Women in Rural India', *Signs*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1982, p. 137.

<sup>5</sup> Gail Omvedt, *We Will Smash This Prison: Indian Women in Struggle* (London, 1980), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

women which supplants the mythic and idealized 'Indian womanhood' of the nationalists or the objectified 'woman' of orthodox anthropology. Yet, in a discourse so concerned with challenging the very process by which traditional 'images' of women are produced, it is 'surprising to find feminist texts blind to their own image-making and laying claim to accurately portray "real" Third World women.'<sup>7</sup>

The following is an exploration of a textual body of knowledge on Indian women with particular reference to the problem of the unmediated association between representation and reality that surfaces when non-Western women are the object of feminism's gaze.<sup>8</sup> What is addressed is the overlap between Indian and Western feminist portraits of Indian women. Whilst this overlap is a textual one—thus excluding important instances of women's protests informed often by more heterodox ideologies—and covers only a section of the literature, it is large and significant enough to warrant discussion.<sup>9</sup> The discussion therefore concerns a strain of feminism operating at the intersection of East and West, the Third and First Worlds. The purpose is to examine this juncture as the point at which feminism collides and colludes with the discourse of Orientalism.

The institutional site from which feminism speaks of Indian women is 'the field'. It shares this site with anthropology but adopts a particular style and approach to it. 'The field' in feminist studies of Third World women is more than simply an area for specialist academic research; it is stressed as the place where 'everyday' experiences occur. A deliberate attempt is made to bypass theoretical frameworks in favour of the 'direct experience'.<sup>10</sup> Value-free commentary, academic prose and the idea of objective scholarship, all common features of the orthodox anthropological study, are rejected. The texts do not set out 'to compile a book of academic essays . . . but to publish little-known material based entirely on the

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the texts under scrutiny see my MA thesis 'Feminist Fictions', University of Melbourne, 1985.

<sup>8</sup> The point is not to prove that these portraits are unreal or less real than they claim to be. Such an exercise would involve the contraposition of evidence and counter-evidence.

<sup>9</sup> This overlap can also be observed in common institutional and cultural practices Women in Asia conferences or titles of feminist texts advertised in *Manushi* for example.

<sup>10</sup> See Helen Roberts (ed.), *Doing Feminist Research* (London, 1981), p. 98.

direct experiences of women activists from the Third World'.<sup>11</sup> They prefer 'the conversational mode to the structural interview technique', using no formal questionnaire<sup>12</sup> and 'attempt to recapture the turmoil and exhilaration of that period'.<sup>13</sup> The aim is to fill the gap between an 'unashamedly critical' approach to the study of Indian women and 'dispassionate documentation'<sup>14</sup> and to separate 'what people really do from what they say they do'.<sup>15</sup> 'These are not academic studies carried out in social and political isolation', claims a review of three texts from this strain of feminism, but an 'attempt to transmit the immediacy of experience and knowledge gained in struggle, in order to overcome the split between theory and activism'.<sup>16</sup>

There are countless ways of marking a text as 'information', and this deliberately non-theoretical approach is one of them. Verisimilitude is established by stressing 'the field' as the site of the discourse. While fieldwork is not a device in itself which necessarily legitimates a narrative, the way it is invoked, in this type of feminist research, assumes that it does. The discourse places great emphasis on the 'immediacy' and the 'directness' of the investigator's experience. Often the lengthy descriptions of atmosphere and surroundings are written in the present tense, restructuring time to reinforce place;<sup>17</sup> the picture is of the investigating subject 'really being there'. This endorses the text as credible, legitimate information. It also makes the image of Indian women conveyed appear more like a photograph than a portrait. Predicating 'the field' and the indisputability of the eyewitness report operate as a very persuasive truth tactic.

The effectiveness of the 'I was there so it must be true' position rests on an assumed unfiltered identity between fieldwork (as presented in feminist texts) and reality. This identity appears as taken for granted. The narrative techniques borrowed from realist fiction which create this identity are hidden. The fieldwork experience not only legitimates feminist texts on Third World women, but it also

<sup>11</sup> Davies, p. i.

<sup>12</sup> Perdita Huston, *Third World Women Speak Out* (New York, 1979), p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Omvedt, p. 155.

<sup>14</sup> Patricia Jeffery, *Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah* (London, 1979), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> E. S. Kessler, *Women: An Anthropological View* (New York, 1976), p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> N. Murray, 'Book Review', *Race and Class*, vol. xxv, no. 3, Winter 1984, p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> See Omvedt's description of Bori Arab, p. 9; and Jeffery's Old Delhi, p. 7.

structures all description and analysis.<sup>18</sup> In these texts the link between fieldwork and reality is forged by a category granted a peculiar objectivity in the discourse: the 'direct experience'. Feminism paradoxically insists that the 'direct experience' textually conveyed is somehow more real than the indirect textual experience, thus denying that its own textual productions are implicated in another kind of image-making.

Alongside the positivist empiricism of the 'I was there so it must be true' position is the position 'I am a woman, so it must be true'. What Elshtain describes as the 'mask of unquestioned, inner authenticity based upon claims of the ontological superiority of female being-in-itself' can be recognized again and again in the texts under scrutiny.<sup>19</sup> For example, 'women as women' are seen to have a 'special drive for liberation';<sup>20</sup> what are considered 'questionable' research methods are replaced by the unchallengeable 'we were simply women talking together'.<sup>21</sup> However, the most frequently used claim to truth is the inclusion of and emphasis on the 'voice' of non-Western women. The discourse prides itself on being unique in providing the opportunity for Third World women to 'speak for themselves'. But what does 'speaking for themselves' mean in this context? Firstly, it certainly does not mean that these women actually do speak. Feminism laments the silencing of 'our Third World sisters',<sup>22</sup> chides itself for ever trying to speak for them and then 'grants' them a voice in much the same way as women are 'given' equal rights. It 'allows', 'encourages', or 'lets' them speak; it claims not to speak for them. The problems inherent in such premises need further examination.

In 'Sexual Class in India',<sup>23</sup> Mody and Mhatre simultaneously assert that Indian women are capable and incapable of 'speaking'. They argue that 'the public voice [of the Indian woman] has long been stifled' by a 'male-dominated society' and see 'her present silence on the problems she faces' as connected to 'a self-image

<sup>18</sup> A similar trend in experimental anthropology has been discussed by G. E. Marcus and D. Cushman, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1982, 11, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> Elshtain, p. 605.

<sup>20</sup> Eleanor Leacock, 'Women, Development and Anthropological Facts & Fictions', *The Politics of Anthropology*, ed. G. Huizer (The Hague, 1979), p. 132.

<sup>21</sup> Huston, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Editorial statement, 'Third World: The Politics of Being Other', *Heresies*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1979.

<sup>23</sup> S. Mody and S. Mhatre, 'Sexual Class in India', *B.C.A.S.*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1975.

[which] is severely distorted and repressed'.<sup>24</sup> Their interview and subsequent article provide the forum or the 'little encouragement' needed for the Indian woman, 'to shake off this imposed reticence and speak on her own behalf of her problems and their solutions'.<sup>25</sup> Yet whose voice is it that we hear in what follows?

After a brief description of 'the field', in this case the slums of Bombay, we are introduced to three women who live there. The first interview begins: 'Janabai gives her age as forty-five. Though she appears much older, her tiny frame is erect and strong'.<sup>26</sup> What follows are details of Janabai's life, her attitude to Congress and her views on the problems of Bombay. They are listed in simple, unadorned prose giving the appearance that Janabai's words are being read directly, and not those of the writers. However, to return to these opening lines, it is not Janabai saying she is forty-five that we hear. It is Mody and Mhatre who intervene with 'she *gives* her age as forty-five although she *appears* much older'. The italicized words place the reader alongside the investigator, observing Janabai. We are invited *not* to believe Janabai's knowledge of her own age but rather the initial impressions the interviewers have of it. Why not begin (if indeed the aim is to present genuine interviews) with, 'Janabai is forty-five'? Clearly the answer is that it would both convey too little and that the discourse wants to make the investigating subject *appear* invisible, not actually *be* invisible.<sup>27</sup> As it stands, the opening lines economically build a picture of 'the Other', the tiny but strong, overworked ('she appears much older') peasant woman trapped in an urban slum. These lines tap into a familiar and clichéd picture which hardly requires the 'two dozen green bangles' and 'decorative tattoos' as elaboration.

Janabai, Lucy and Shevanti's words are stifled by those so desperate to hear them. Instead of interviews with questions and answers and direct speech, we are given summaries, edited into a neat and tidy package written from the point of view of the investigator. Nevertheless the appearance that Third World women are 'speaking for themselves' is maintained despite the constant interruptions and corrections made to their so called speech. For example Perdita Huston breaks the 'direct record' of the words of a Kenyan woman with, 'The old woman made two comments that seem contradic-

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> This is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's phrase.

tory... In fact, these comments were common misinterpretations of the results of improved health care'.<sup>28</sup> If anyone is actually 'speaking out', it is the interviewer, yet the discourse repeatedly insists that it 'does not speak for' the non-Western woman. It attempts to resolve these contradictory contentions by the reluctant admission that some of these women are, as yet, incapable of speech, thereby strengthening the impression that feminism is a logical and coherent system.

The semblance of coherence is sustained by the argument that a woman such as Janabai, for example, has no voice because she speaks in the mode 'of the social mechanism which represses women'.<sup>29</sup> According to Mody and Mhatre, 'she has not the ability to think or act otherwise'.<sup>30</sup> What then constitutes a voice in the feminist discourse if it is not women actually speaking? How do these researchers, who choose 'the field' as the site legitimating their own speech, identify amongst the babble of tape recordings and sheets of notes, what is and is not a voice?

Voice and consciousness are linked in confusing and inconsistent ways. Some texts see 'the woman's lack of consciousness of rights which should be hers' as preventing her 'from acting on her own behalf'.<sup>31</sup> Consciousness therefore comes from outside, when women 'are encouraged to voice their resentment, to identify their oppressors and to struggle to improve their condition'.<sup>32</sup> The unresolved paradox here is that consciousness relies on voice to be recognized and generated yet there can be no voice without consciousness.

Various journalistic techniques are used to signal what is 'information' in contemporary texts on Third World women. They create the 'mood of involvement and style without commentary' of the deliberately anti-theoretical approach adopted by this branch of the discourse.<sup>33</sup> These strategies range from the telegraphic messages of the headline-like chapter headings ('Encounter with an Agricultural Labourer', for example) and focusing on small detail, to visual descriptions that are frozen in the 'anthropological present'.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Huston, p. 21.

<sup>29</sup> Mody and Mhatre, p. 54.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Omvedt, p. 155.

<sup>34</sup> See M. King Whyte, *The Status of Pre-Industrial Societies* (New Jersey, 1978), p. 20.

It is worth examining in detail, Gail Omvedt's description of the first village she visited, not to single out her techniques as exceptional, but to assess how the reader is made complicit with the text in this branch of feminism.<sup>35</sup> Note the opening lines. 'Bori Arab: village on the sun-baked plateau of central India, with little to distinguish it from hundreds of thousands of other Indian villages except that I have decided to visit it for my first encounter with agricultural labourers'.<sup>36</sup> The brevity and urgency of the first part of this sentence is that of the telegraphic newspaper report (Stop Press! Bori Arab: village on the ...) or the travel documentary rather than the specialist academic study. The clipped phrasing and clichéd images (sun-baked plateau) are so familiar the reader is almost immediately receptive to the 'information' that is to follow. The discourse calls on a Western culture's collective idea of a typical village (as Bori Arab is 'like hundreds of thousands of other Indian villages') and asks us to place the hero of this narrative, Gail Omvedt, in it, as the village's only distinguishing feature. The reader collaborates in the meaning process—filling in the gaps left by such compact journalese. We prepare ourselves to follow Gail Omvedt on her feminist odyssey where she will 'encounter' (rather than meet) the strange and exotic and 'have experiences'.

As this description is in the present tense, the reader is on the bus while Bhimrao ('a young union organizer friend') is allowed to 'speak for himself'. The attention to detail like 'He pauses as the jolting bus swings aside to pass a bullock cart',<sup>37</sup> both establishes verisimilitude and positions the reader alongside the narrator as though approaching Bori Arab for the first time with excitement and trepidation. The impression is successfully created that we are on the bus, seeing the India of the traveller flash past the window. Instead of viewing the comments that follow on the position of women in India as conveniently placed background information, the complicit reader is blind to textual strategies, seeing only what appear as innocent musings on the part of the narrator. If the text opened with an account of Bori Arab where the retrospectivity of the writing was acknowledged, the reader would be in a position to choose whether what was presented was 'respectable information'

<sup>35</sup> Authors' names appear in this discussion to mark certain texts. If in fact they no longer subscribe to the positions outlined here this does not alter the central tenets of the argument.

<sup>36</sup> Omvedt, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

or travel-slide reminiscences. The text, however, is built in such a way that the reader's options are limited. As we are placed on the bus with Omvedt, to reject what she sees would be like disbelieving what is in front of our own eyes. In this respect, the techniques which appear crude when singled out, are sophisticated in their combined effect. Note the following comments: 'Merchants sit in their shops and stare as we walk past; off to the right is a school and what is *probably* a village council building set back from the road in a compound flanked with trees and a few flowering shrubs'.<sup>38</sup> It is not the attention to detail that stamps this extract as information but the calculated use of the word 'probably'. Gail Omvedt knows very well it is a village council building when she writes this (she visits it after lunch that day). The appearance of doubt in the retrospective description is to make the text seem less textual; like untidy reality rather than a literary construct. Moreover, to successfully carry off such ploys, the discourse has to be tuned all the more finely.

Similar techniques of legitimization are used by others. Patricia Jeffery also highlights small detail, writes in the present tense and takes the reader with her through her 'first time' experiences,<sup>39</sup> as does Perdita Huston, although her textual strategies are not as elaborate.<sup>40</sup> A uniform style and approach is adopted from text to text within this branch of the discourse. The 'I' is simultaneously emphasized and de-emphasized, functioning to both highlight the significance of the personal revelations of the investigator and hide the investigator's presence. For example, Gail Omvedt writes 'and finally I *found myself there* in Ahmednagar, talking in a tumultuous hall thronged with women',<sup>41</sup> thus making her presence appear right, natural and inevitable. Another way the 'investigating subject' is 'rendered transparent'<sup>42</sup> is through the impression that the subjects under investigation have themselves initiated the research. 'This has been a book forced on me by the women themselves', writes Jeffery.<sup>43</sup> Such comments in the 'speaking for themselves' category (as though the researchers had little control over being there, let alone selecting issues and topics for discussion) verify what is being described. What is interesting is not the fact of legitimization—all texts legitimate themselves—but the conflict between the techniques

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 12 (my emphasis).      <sup>39</sup> See Jeffery, p.9.

<sup>40</sup> See Huston, p. 20.      <sup>41</sup> Omvedt, p. 1 (my emphasis).

<sup>42</sup> I am grateful to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak for this insight.

<sup>43</sup> Jeffery, p. 30.

used and the discourse's feminist concerns. It would seem that as feminism weaves its picture of non-Western women, so it undoes many of its own aims.

### *The 'Already Said'*

Feminism is validated by the existence of the sovereign female subject. The concept of a separate and identifiable feminist consciousness relies on the discourse's capacity to demonstrate that women are capable of being the creators of history; that they are active, autonomous subjects 'in their own right'. Yet it is in its search for the sovereign female subject and in its attempt to define the autonomy of the Third World woman that feminism gets entangled with nationalism and Orientalism. Ironically, the trajectories of feminist and imperialist thought cross at the very point where feminism aims to distance itself from these discourses. It is at this point that the 'half silent murmur' of Orientalism becomes audible in feminism.

Feminism universalizes itself by negating, thus transcending its Western origins. It saves itself from appearing imperialistic by celebrating cultural specificity or 'difference' in the lives of non-Western women. This abhorrence of 'sameness' in the Third World woman, however, raises interesting problems for the discourse's call for an international sisterhood. An examination of the complicated interplay between sameness and difference reveals that feminism has not cleaned itself of the Orientalist problematic. Within feminist discussion on Third World women, two solutions are offered to the problem of how and on whom subject status can be conferred. Subjecthood is not granted to just any woman. Certain women, or groups of women, qualify by fulfilling a set of criteria which varies according to the particular brand of feminism at work. The two under discussion here are the feminist solution and what may be called, in the Indian case, the nationalist-feminist solution. The first is typified by the work of Gail Omvedt, and the second by that of Madhu Kishwar and some articles in *Manushi*. My aim is to map the considerable overlap between these two feminisms, to identify the points at which they diverge, and to look at what the solution of 'putting women back into history' doesn't solve.

In contemporary studies of Third World women, the sovereign female subject cannot be Western/Westernized. This proposition

is shared by those speaking from either Kishwar's or Omvedt's perspective. Erasing 'the West' has come to be a prerequisite for subjecthood and hence liberation. Almost without exception, any recent feminist statement about Third World women is prefaced by the qualification, 'As a western feminist...'.<sup>44</sup> What 'Western' stands for in this context is far more than simply an area on a map; moreover, its meaning is considered to be self-evident and no accompanying explanation is deemed necessary. Obviously, enclosed in the term is the history of European enlightenment and colonization—the West as constantly spreading its material and cultural domination—particularly as it is mentioned as a point of contrast, a mark of difference, although in the contemporary feminist debate it also refers to a restriction or boundary to 'true' understanding and liberation. Elsie Boulding, for example, opens her study with the comments, 'I am a Westerner, with all the limitations of insight, experience and sensitivity that being a Westerner in the late twentieth century involves'.<sup>45</sup> Her statements are typical of the type frequently encountered in this branch of the feminist debate, where the tone is confessional and the experience (of discovering these boundaries) revelatory.

The label 'Western feminist' is always derogatory, not least when it is used by women who fit into the classification themselves. In its extended version, 'white, middle-class, Euro-American feminists',<sup>46</sup> the pejorative nature of the sign is made more explicit, yet this is hardly necessary, as the term 'Western' adequately covers a whole range of negative associations. It is never used to indicate something positive. Rather it signals guilt and discomfort and functions as a mark of self-denigration.<sup>47</sup>

To be 'Western' is to be in a kind of purdah; it is to be blind, restricted and limited. Ironically, these are the very characteristics feminists once ascribed to women of non-Western cultures. To use the label 'Western', however, is to unveil oneself, thus transcending what the term designates. Its invocation reverses what Western sig-

<sup>44</sup> For examples see *Heresies*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1981; *Frontiers*, vol. vii, no. 2, 1983; *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1982.

<sup>45</sup> Elsie Boulding, *Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1977), p. 10.

<sup>46</sup> V. Amos and P. Parmar, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', *Feminist Review*, 17, 1984, p. 6.

<sup>47</sup> For examples see Davies, p. viii, and J. Minces, *The House of Obedience: Women in Arab Society* (London, 1980), p. 13.

nifies, and it no longer operates as a sign of imperialism within the feminist discourse but rather indicates the anti-imperialist intentions of feminism.

The frequency with which the apology ‘As a western feminist . . .’ is mentioned in the contemporary discussion has importance as an anti-imperialist strategy. As the debate on feminism and imperialism has become increasingly sophisticated, so the tactics used to dissociate one from the other proliferate. Nevertheless, these are not simply confined to the feminist discourse that is generated from Western countries; nor does the sign take on an entirely different set of meanings depending on the geographic location or ethnicity of the speaker using it. There is considerable overlap in what ‘Western’ stands for in nationalist-feminist discourses on women and in the contemporary feminist discourse on imperialism.

‘Those using the term ‘Western feminist’ to signify limitations and short-sightedness do so from a shared cultural background; they speak either from the privilege of the West or from a position of access to the privileges ‘the West’ stands for. Hence Madhu Kishwar is able to describe herself as a ‘Westernized modernist, completely alienated from [her] own culture and the people who hold it dear’.<sup>48</sup> According to this perspective ‘Westernized feminists’ face a similar barrier to understanding their own culture as ‘Western feminists’ do in understanding someone else’s. The barrier in this case is their Westernization. Kishwar’s comments possess the same self-deprecatory tone as those cited from feminists in the West. She writes:

Those of us who wish to combat or reject these ‘cultural ideals of womanhood’ have, however, been largely ineffective because we tend to do so from a totally ‘Western modernist’ standpoint. The tendency is to make people feel that they are backward and stupid to hold values that need to be rejected outright. We must learn to begin with more respect for traditions which people hold dear.<sup>49</sup>

The ‘we’ in this statement would have to include the ‘Western feminist’. However, there is a point at which she is excluded, and this is where feminism takes on a specifically nationalist character.

While the sign ‘Western’ as a critique of itself is shared across

<sup>48</sup> M. Kishwar and R. Vanita (eds.), *In Search of Answers: Indian Women’s Voices from Manushi* (London, 1984), p. 47.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

both discourses, the category 'Western woman' has an additional meaning specific to Indian nationalist thought. This complicates an Indian feminism strongly shaped by nationalism because the rejection of 'the West', including Western women, has been part of a nationalist tradition. While the nationalist construction of 'the Western woman' is a separate study, some comments made by Vivekananda in his lectures in America provide a useful illustration of the blueprint of Indian versus Western womanhood which later appears in feminist texts from India. A newspaper report records:

[Vivekananda] stated that in India the woman was the visible manifestation of God and that her whole life was given up to the thought that she was a mother, and to be perfect mother she must be chaste. No mother in India ever abandoned her offspring, he said, and defied anyone to prove the contrary. The girls in India would die if they, like American girls, were obliged to expose their bodies to the vulgar gaze of young men.<sup>50</sup>

This same opposition occurs in feminist texts published almost a century later.<sup>51</sup> This is *not* the self-image of Western feminism. While the idea of the West/Westernization as a restriction may be shared throughout the discourse, this view of 'the Western woman' is purely a nationalist construction. This is where Indian feminism creates its own discursive space.

The opposition between 'the Indian woman' as chaste spirituality or maternal sensuality and the unchaste, cold, sexual consumerism of 'the Western woman' is the same spiritual/material, East/West dichotomy generated by the Orientalist. As Partha Chatterjee has demonstrated, Indian nationalist thought has itself been shaped by the dominating frameworks of Orientalism.<sup>52</sup> It should not be surprising then that a self-consciously nationalistic Indian feminism is similarly influenced. Note some further comments by Madhu Kishwar:

For most modernists, for example, Sita represents the hallmark of women's subservience. But Gandhi's Sita is not the self effacing, fire ordeal facing Sita. Gandhi's Sita is a woman who will not let her husband

<sup>50</sup> Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta, 1964), vol. iii, p. 506.

<sup>51</sup> See for example P. Asthana's *Women's Movement in India* (Delhi, 1974), p. 239.

<sup>52</sup> P. Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London, 1986).

touch her if he approaches her in a disrespectful way, nor dared the mighty Ravana ravish Sita against her will even though she stayed captive in his kingdom for many years. She also becomes a symbol of Swadeshi. She is the woman who will not dress up in foreign finery in order to appear attractive and be a sex object.<sup>53</sup>

Here, what is not-Indian is dressing up in foreign finery and behaving like a sex object. Conversely, Indian womanhood is synonymous with chastity. It is possible, however, to be Indian and not really *be* 'Indian' by being a 'westernized modernist'. However, one's Indianness can be restored and liberation achieved by the rejection of the modernist notion of Sita as the 'hallmark of women's subservience' and the embracing of a nationalist one: Gandhi's Sita. What is particular to nationalist-feminism in this case is that the liberating experience for women is that of nationalism.

'Nationalism transforms the 'subservient, uneducated and secluded upper class woman of the nineteenth century' into the 'articulate, educated' woman of the mid twentieth century, active in professions and public life.<sup>54</sup> According to the discourse, Westernization does not lead to this transformation but rather produces 'educated women in India, who, in the name of modernity, are ready to sacrifice even the best of their culture and traditions and become Westernized butterflies'.<sup>55</sup> So the nationalist-feminist project in India posits a paradoxical solution to the 'woman question': it is a search for a truly indigenous, and in that sense particularistic, culture capable of achieving the 'universal' goals of feminism. Thus Kishwar again writes

Our cultural traditions have tremendous potential within them to combat reactionary and anti-women ideas, if we can identify their points of strength and use them creatively. The rejection of the harmful is then made much easier than attempts to overthrow traditions totally or attack them arrogantly from outside, as most of us Westernized modernists tend to do...<sup>56</sup>

As the search for a sovereign female subject in nationalist-feminism becomes an endeavour to find 'India', an autonomous culture, then it is immaterial whether subjecthood is granted to the élite or non-élite woman. What is deemed important by Kishwar's feminism is not the class background of the women who are classi-

<sup>53</sup> Kishwar, p. 47.

<sup>54</sup> J. Matson Everett, *Women and Social Change in India* (New York, 1979), p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Asthana, p. 159.

<sup>56</sup> Kishwar, p. 47.

fied as subjects 'in their own right', but rather the extent to which they have rejected 'the West'. Therefore, the nationalist-feminist resolution of the problem of women's autonomy is conditional on the absence of the West.

This discussion, however, is not intended to divide feminism along ethnic or geographic lines as 'Indian' or 'Western'. This would be reproducing the very categories and divisions (West–non-West) I seek to unravel. The nationalist problematic is shared by some 'Western' scholars as well. For example, Meredith Borthwick's study of middle-class Bengali women from 1895–1905 is part of Kishwar's, not Omvedt's, variety of feminism. This alignment is evident both in the contradictions which emerge in her conclusion, and the way she goes about resolving them. The central conflict is that while the notion of women as subjects of their own history runs throughout her study, 'in the final analysis, the *bhadramahila* were not in a position to transform their lives according to their own needs and wishes'.<sup>57</sup> This contradiction is resolved through the adoption of a nationalist solution: by equating modernity (i.e. Westernization) with this lack of sovereignty. The *bhadramahila* were acting out the history of male social reformers ('They accepted the value system of the dominant male group'<sup>58</sup>) by embracing the 'modern' and representing new values of 'cleanliness, orderliness, thrift, responsibility, intelligence, and a moderate interest in and knowledge of the public world of men'.<sup>59</sup> A peculiar kind of subjecthood, however, is bestowed on them through emphasizing the way they 'harmonized' or 'synthesized' the modern and traditional. They become 'autonomous' by accepting nationalism and resisting 'the West'. 'They implicitly resisted simple Westernization and attempted to harmonize what they valued in society with what they saw as worthy of imitation in the ways of Victorian women'.<sup>60</sup> It is this resistance to 'simple Westernization' that makes the *bhadramahila* the subject of their own history, according to Borthwick. Conversely, the limit or restriction to the *bhadramahila*'s status as 'autonomous' is in the implicit nature of this resistance. This raises another point about the problem of women, subjecthood and history. Resistance, for it to equal full autonomy or sovereignty, must be active and explicit. Hence, the apology that even though 'the

<sup>57</sup> Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1894–1905* (New Jersey, 1985), p. 359.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 358.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 360.

bhadramahila perceived that women were subject to social oppression', 'they did not react to this awareness by what we would now describe as group militancy'.<sup>61</sup>

Activity thus has come to be a further necessary condition for women to qualify as subjects. In fact the discourse is beginning to censor the very notion of the non-active woman. The portrait of the veiled, submissive Indian woman, 'beaten down and subjugated by the arranged marriage system—a woman ruled by the wishes of her family—a woman not able to assert her own ambitions and desires . . .' is increasingly viewed as a fiction, as a figment of racist imaginings stemming from an 'ideology of passivity, created as a means of subjugation by colonialists'.<sup>62</sup> So the current rendering of 'the Indian woman' by nationalist feminists has the following features. Firstly, for women to be subjects in their own right, the non-West must be literally present. In Kishwar and Borthwick this presence can be found in both élite and non-élite women because it is represented by a nationalist resistance to the West, either in the form of its complete or partial (hence harmonizing East and West) rejection. Secondly, the subject must be the active participant in the making of her own history, not the passive recipient of someone else's. Thus the high profile given to women's *movements* in studies of Third World women. In nationalist-feminism, these movements do not have to be specifically feminist.<sup>63</sup> Involvement in the nationalist struggle can be seen as suitable qualification for subjecthood.<sup>64</sup>

Non-nationalist feminism, despite considerable overlap, constitutes the female subject in a different way. The portrait of Indian women drawn by feminists such as Omyedt is the militant tribal activist breaking through police lines in the forefront of marches, or the toiling woman, marching through villages, singing and shouting about 'wife beating, dowry, rape, as well as economic and tribal oppression'.<sup>65</sup> Within a non-nationalist perspective, élite or middle class women are denied any independent or autonomous role in history. The West is not sufficiently purged from this class for the discourse to grant them such a role. Instead, non-élite women are

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 361.

<sup>62</sup> Parita Trivedi, 'To Deny Our Fullness: Asian Women in the Making of History', *Feminist Review*, 17, 1984, p. 38.

<sup>63</sup> See Davies, p. ii.

<sup>64</sup> See Borthwick, p. 361.

<sup>65</sup> V. Patel, 'Adivasi Women on the Warpath', in Davies pp. 249–52; see also Omvedt.

the repositories for what are considered to be the necessary requirements for subjecthood. They signify a complete absence of the West (hence autonomy) and embody activity, particularly tribal women who are consistently described as 'vigorous', 'toiling', 'labouring', 'struggling' or 'fighting'. Omvedt's discussion separates itself from that of Kishwar not in its description of non-élite women but by representing élite women as somehow less 'authentic' Indian women, less 'subjects in their own right' than tribals, peasants, or women from urban slums.

Proving the absence of the West, both in the investigating subject and in the subject under investigation is part of feminism's critique of its own imperialism. As the discourse makes 'the West' and 'imperialist' interchangeable, getting rid of one is viewed as a way of discarding the other. The (West/non-West) distinction therefore is placed at the very core of feminist studies of Third World women. Texts centre around questions like 'women in India obviously had different problems from women in the United States but exactly how different were they?'<sup>66</sup> The biologism of the 'all women are the same' proposition is rejected. In its place is the sensitivity to cultural specificity and an abhorrence of sameness. Yet while 'difference' and the distinction between the 'West' and the 'non-West' is emphasized as a way of signifying the anti-imperialist intentions of feminism, the idea of 'an international sisterhood' remains intact. The discourse simultaneously asks, 'Is Western feminism yet another form of imperialism dressed up in radical clothes?', and hails the creation of 'an international movement among women'.<sup>67</sup>

So despite the abhorrence of sameness reflected in Kishwar's *Sita* or Omvedt's tribals, feminism still maintains that there is a universal sisterhood where women, regardless of culture, have something in common. This pattern is illustrated in Miranda Davies' Preface to *Third World: Second Sex*.

This book is a compilation of interviews and articles by women from the Third World. The voices speaking here are very diverse. They belong to women from countries as different as Oman, Bolivia, India, Mauritius and Zimbabwe. These women share no one single approach to women's liberation, but together they all show the revolutionary emergence of a new feminist consciousness amongst women in the Third World ...

<sup>66</sup> Omvedt, p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> Barbara Alpern Engel, 'Introduction: Feminism and the Non-Western World', *Frontiers*, vol. vii, no. 2, pp. 1-3.

Whether at home, in the street, in the workplace or fighting in a guerrilla army, we all experience sexism in our daily lives. By revealing the deep-rooted similarities, as well as some of the many differences between women's struggles in the West and in the Third World, the following collection aims to help build some of the links needed for the development of women's liberation on a truly international scale.<sup>68</sup>

I quote this extract at length, to show how difference and sameness interconnect in the discourse.

Firstly, difference is not situated in the women themselves but rather in the countries from which the women speak (Oman, Bolivia, Zimbabwe, etc.). As the discussion runs, it is the experience of culture that makes for the diversity in voices. This different experience may be identified as 'being directly involved in an armed struggle',<sup>69</sup> attending a certain type of college ('Indian college students are so different from Western ones'<sup>70</sup>) or simply by a particular setting, 'a cattle field in Kenya or a tea bush in Sri Lanka', for example.<sup>71</sup> The contemporary feminist discourse stresses such difference and places women, with great care, in a specific cultural environment; not to do so would foster charges of imperialism. Yet, despite this emphasis on differences between women, widely differing experiences do not, as might be expected, produce contradictory feminisms. Rather, the opposite occurs and while as the extract argues no 'one single approach to women's liberation is adopted', together these diverse voices 'all show the revolutionary emergence of a new feminist consciousness amongst women in the Third World'. This position is crystallized in a recent edition of *Feminist Review* entitled 'Many Voices: One Chant'.<sup>72</sup> Hailing the prospect of a 'universal sisterhood' seems to be the end product of much feminist research into Third World women, regardless of claims that 'Western feminism is based on a concept of freedom that does not exist in the Third World',<sup>73</sup> or conversely that the specific situations that give rise to 'a feminist consciousness in the Third World' will 'be unfamiliar to feminists in the West'.<sup>74</sup> No matter how complete the difference may be between cultures, the women themselves remain the same. What unites women, then, must be something beyond culture.

<sup>68</sup> Davies, p. i.      <sup>69</sup> Ibid.      <sup>70</sup> Omvedt, p. 33.

<sup>71</sup> Huston, p. 12.      <sup>72</sup> *Feminist Review*, 17, Autumn, 1984.

<sup>73</sup> Belinda Aquino, 'Feminism Across Cultures', *Women in Asia Workshop Papers*, Monash University, July 1983.      <sup>74</sup> Davies, p. i.

So cultures can be different; women cannot. Sameness, or what links women to each other, is the 'experience of being a woman', according to the discourse, because it is the same despite differences in culture. Cultural (i.e. historical) differences are irrelevant to any understanding of this 'experience', which is thereby situated in something universal to all human cultures and beyond the pale of history. The concept of a 'universal sisterhood' or 'women's liberation on a truly international scale'<sup>75</sup> is based on an essentialist notion of womanness beyond history, nation and class. And what is this womanness if it is not constituted by woman's experience of her biology, or nature? Take these examples from Huston. She writes, 'We were simply women talking together. In a cattle field in Kenya, beside a tea bush in Sri Lanka or sheltered from the sun in a palm-roofed hut in the Sudan. . .'.<sup>76</sup> Later she expresses surprise at the 'striking commonality' between women in different cultural settings, 'whether they were educated, literate, urban or rural'.<sup>77</sup> Obviously the discourse is not so crude as to suggest that it is only the possession of a woman's body that creates this 'commonality' between women, thus dissolving vast cultural, economic and geographic boundaries into 'we were simply women talking together'. Rather, *experience* is identified as the factor producing these common links.

Whether this 'experience of being a woman' is described in terms of sharing 'the most basic values' or being treated in a sexist fashion,<sup>78</sup> the fact remains that the discourse places this type of experience at the conjunction of Nature and Culture, and in so doing undoes what has been a major project for twentieth-century feminism. Interestingly, this placement occurs even in texts which attempt to transcend the biological location of woman. Examine Robin Morgan's comments, for example, when she writes: 'Nor is there anything mystical or biologically deterministic about this commonality [between women]. It is the result of a *common condition* which, despite variations in degree, is *experienced* by all human beings who are born female.'<sup>79</sup> Female 'experience' and being 'born female' are collapsed in this discourse. Note the development of her argument countering charges of biologism: 'Rape, after all, is an omnipresent terror to *all* women of any class, race or caste. Battery is a nightmare of emotional and physical pain no matter who the

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.      <sup>76</sup> Huston, p. 12.      <sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>78</sup> Davies, p. i.

<sup>79</sup> Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood is Global* (Harmondsworth, 1984), p. 4.

victim. Labor and childbirth feel the same to any woman.<sup>80</sup> Suffice it here to say that this extract goes a step further in absolutely denying the role of culture in creating ideas of childbirth, notions of pain, technologies for dealing with pain or what is classified as violence, let alone what constitutes the category 'woman'. Her words sit very uneasily with second-wave feminism's struggle in the West to prove that 'biology is not destiny'.

Much cross-cultural research has attempted to show that on the basis of biology 'each culture elaborates an entire configuration of values, attitudes and expectation'.<sup>81</sup> What 'woman' is seen to be by a particular culture, depends on a cultural definition of woman, not simply on some primal experience of certain universal biological facts. For this to be ignored in feminist studies of Third World women, and for the sign 'woman' to be taken as a biological-experiential given, representing much more Nature than Culture, is not only to undermine what is at the heart of the feminist problematic but to yet again reproduce an Orientalist perspective of non-Western cultures. Perhaps this is better argued in the form of an equation. According to this discourse:

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{DIFFERENCE} = \text{EXPERIENCE} \\ \hline \text{SAMENESS} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{OF THE NON-WEST} \\ \hline \text{OF THE BIOLOGICAL} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} = \text{CULTURE} \\ \hline \text{NATURE} \end{array}$$

Axioms of imperialism cross this equation in two ways.<sup>82</sup> Firstly, it would be unacceptable to align 'Woman' and 'Nature' if First World women were the object of study. In studies of the Third World, such a connection goes unnoticed. Both this connection and its invisibility stem from a tradition of power and domination over the object being represented.

Secondly, regardless of whether other cultures are classified along geographic, economic or ethnic lines as India, the East, the Third World, the non-Western world, they are consistently represented as essentially different from that to which they are constantly compared: the West. It is the construction of a non-West along essentialist lines that marks feminism as Orientalist; the Orient being essentially non-West. In the words of Fanon, they are 'fixed in a

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>81</sup> P. Hammond and A. Jablow (eds.), *Women Cultures of the World* (California, 1976), p. 5.

<sup>82</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's phrase.

dye' as the 'Other'.<sup>83</sup> Women in India *obviously* had different problems from women in the United States', writes Omvedt.<sup>84</sup> It is this obviousness that needs to be exposed, for to define difference in this way as expected and natural is to link feminism and Orientalism. 'Difference', in the otherizing process of feminism, is located in the exclusion of 'the West'. And it is the '*not* being something' that defines it as immutably different. What is pushed into Nature is the 'non', the category of the Third World, India or 'other' cultures.

Accordingly, what makes 'the Third World woman' both different and the same is that she is placed beyond Culture in the experience of Nature. Such an equation subverts the central aims of the discourse posing it, thus reflecting an unresolved problem within feminist thought. This is the problem of the relationship between history and the question of women's liberation and the hence uncertain epistemological status of the category 'woman's experience' that informs feminist debate.

### *The 'Never Said'*

What is 'not said' in the feminist discussion of Third World women ensures that contingent utterance has the status of unconditional truth. The 'never said' enables certain categories to be produced which appear self-evident and beyond question. Feminism, to convincingly portray itself as universal, relies on premises which are taken as givens, above challenge. It is validated as much by what it does not say as by what it actually says. The notion of an 'international sisterhood' is founded on the proposition that a woman's experience is true—'experience' being treated as an objective category in the discourse—and that women can learn from the experience of women in other cultures because in some ways, 'they' are better/stronger/more militant than 'us'. However, the questions not asked are: what constitutes 'experience' in the discourse and how do some subjects of feminist research come to be unqualifiedly valorized?

Contemporary feminist studies of Third World women emphasize the directions or the 'day to dayness' of the experiences of the women they represent. The discourse attempts to offer 'glimpses of

<sup>83</sup> F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York, 1976), p. 109. This 'fixing' is not simply textual. 'Authentic' Third World women can be exhibited at conferences in Australia both as curios and to legitimize the projects of First World feminists.

<sup>84</sup> Omvedt, p. 3.

the vast, complex and unplumbed reality of the day to day struggles of millions of ordinary women in India',<sup>85</sup> to present the 'everyday reality experience by Indian Muslim women'<sup>86</sup> or to capture 'the direct experiences of women activists from the Third World'.<sup>87</sup> In ascribing value to the ordinary, feminism is inverting the traditional patriarchal view that the day to day activities of women are trivial. It is a reaction against discourses which concentrate on 'images of women' over what women actually do.<sup>88</sup> This rebellious inversion is crystallized in the feminist motto of the seventies, 'the personal is political'. While this position has become increasingly sophisticated as second-wave feminism has developed,<sup>89</sup> it is still the case that if something is recorded as a direct experience it is automatically given the status of 'objective', scientific truth. This is particularly evident in feminist studies of Third World women where the category of 'experience' has not been challenged. Even when the discourse reproaches itself for its own imperialism, the prestige of 'experience' remains unquestioned. Experience is seen to be something concrete, quantifiable ('women have had half of the world's collective experience'<sup>90</sup>) and objective; a pure state, on which the validity of a feminist analysis rests. What then constitutes 'experience' in the discourse?

Despite its apparent simplicity, 'experience' in studies of Third World women is not a simple construct. Three different types of experience interlock to form what is designated as 'the experience of being a woman'. Firstly, there is the experience of the subjects under investigation. Secondly, there is the experience of the investigating subject, the woman conducting the research, the narrator of the texts. Thirdly there is the experience of the hypothesized woman reader, an integral part of the textual construction.

Feminism considers all aspects of a woman's experience to be important. Nevertheless, what is identified as an 'experience' conforms to a particular pattern. It is not just any event or happening in a woman's life that earns the status of an experience in feminist utterance. A process of selection occurs (certain types of events are in-

<sup>85</sup> Kishwar, p. i.      <sup>86</sup> Jeffery, p. i.      <sup>87</sup> Davies, p. i.

<sup>88</sup> See Hammond and Jablow, p. i.

<sup>89</sup> See *The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. L. Edwards and A. Diamond (Amherst, 1977).

<sup>90</sup> M. McIntosh, "Comments on Tinker's 'A Feminist View of Copenhagen'", *Signs*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1981, p. 774.

cluded and others excluded) despite the discourse's claim to simply record the direct experiences of women. This pattern of inclusion and exclusion in feminism is not created by 'the experience itself', but by what a particular experience represents. Take the subject under investigation, a woman going to fetch water at the well, for example. Such an event is deemed 'an experience' only because of what it signifies. If it can be made to demonstrate the hardship of a woman's lot, the extent to which she is oppressed or her strength in adversity, then it is included. An event not fulfilling these criteria simply would not be recorded, or if mentioned would be passed off as a false experience. Note the analysis that follows Janabai 'speaking for herself' in 'Sexual Class in India'.

She relies on myth and religious doctrine to

explain the events of her life. It was to her undeniably, the snake who evicted them from the village rather than the probable poverty of a small peasant. And her concept of their son as the reincarnation of the paternal head of the feudal family, clearly indicates the extent to which she depends on that framework for her own behaviour . . . Thus Janabai un-selfconsciously acts out a definite role in the social mechanism which represses women. Thoroughly repressed herself, she has not the ability to think or act otherwise.<sup>91</sup>

In this case, the discourse contradicts its position on the importance of all aspects of a woman's experience; some obviously are more important than others. Why, when Janabai says her family left the village because of the retribution of an angry snake, is the experience not ranked as being *as true as* Shevanti's comments that 'a woman must work outside the home, not only because it is necessary to provide extra income, but also to avoid being dependent on anyone else'?<sup>92</sup> Clearly there is no such thing as the 'experience-in-itself' or the pure, direct experience without a subject defining it as such. Moreover, the experiencing subject, as depicted in these texts, often involves the investigating subject as well.

Great weight is placed on 'experience' in *Manushi*. However, in 1982 a new editorial policy was developed in response to readers' comments about the journal's emphasis on 'reports of oppression, exploitation and violence against women'.<sup>93</sup> A decision was made to include other kinds of women's 'experience', so,

<sup>91</sup> Mody and Mhatre, p. 54.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>93</sup> *Manushi*, 18, 1982, p. 2

first the experience of ordinary women who have, in their own varied ways, combated oppression and moved towards achieving a modicum of independence and self-expression. Second the experience of exceptional women who have been able to make a noteworthy contribution in their chosen fields, thereby exposing the lie that women are innately inferior to men . . .<sup>94</sup>

The impression is thus created that all types of women's experience will be covered in the journal. However, the attendant process of selection, excluding some events as experiences (tenderness between husbands and wives), while privileging others, is hidden. For example, for an event to become an 'experience', it must be combined with a vital ingredient, consciousness,<sup>95</sup> and be identified by the authenticity or directness of its 'voice'. Yet this process is not unmediated. The investigating subject (in this case *Manushi*) is implicated in it by identifying what is 'consciousness', an 'authentic voice' or an 'ordinary woman'. It is not the case that *Manushi* simply has to reveal the direct experiences of the subjects under investigation. For 'experience' is a contingent category, formed and reconstituted by a continuous process of exclusion. It is not a given, something that is 'out there' for people to 'have'; it is created and has a history.

Clearly, it would appear that what comes to be designated as 'experience' (and what is identified as a 'voice') is often that which most closely resembles the thought-world of the investigating subject. S/he is the lynch-pin, holding together two levels of the category. The person conducting the research (in these cases a woman) usually identifies strongly with the subjects under investigation even to the extent of dressing like them, and living as they do. The investigating subject goes to great lengths in the text to establish her credentials, or 'right', to conduct the research. She has access to the culture most others would lack, therefore, the record of her experiences must be true and reliable. This credibility is often demonstrated by the hardship and sacrifice involved in conducting the research. 'I sat endless hours on cowdung plastered floors', writes Jacobson, 'and plodded through numerous rice paddies and blazing hot wheat fields. I joined villagers in short pilgrimages, saw babies being born . . .', etc.<sup>96</sup> Her list is one which is not unfamiliar in the discourse.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Feminism, like marxism, has not quite resolved the problem of 'false consciousness'.      <sup>96</sup> Jacobson, p. 133.

Substantiating the reliability of the first person narrator is a literary convention usually confined to realist fiction. In feminist studies of Third World women, the narrator appeals to the 'authority of experience' to establish her qualifications. While that experience may involve identifying with her subject, Indian women, what constitutes 'experience' for her is very different from what she sees 'experience' as being for them.

The experience of the investigating subject is present in the texts as positive. The research is portrayed as a journey of discovery, which, while having its ups and downs, is full of surprises. 'I tried to capture the turmoil and exhilaration of that period', Omvedt writes.<sup>97</sup> The narrator often projects herself as being naive (at the same time demonstrating her suitability for the task) or as having a particular set of assumptions which are all challenged during the research.<sup>98</sup> The research becomes a feminist odyssey, a revelation either that women do not passively accept the institution of purdah, or that 'women are most militant',<sup>99</sup> or better still that there is a basis for a 'genuinely international sisterhood'.<sup>100</sup>

The positive nature of these experiences stands in marked contrast to the way the 'lives and struggles of their [Indian] sisters' are treated in the texts.<sup>101</sup> 'Suffering' and 'struggle' unrelentingly characterize what the discourse designates as 'experience' for them. Repeatedly, stories are told about wife-beating, rape, economic exploitation and dowry deaths. Once these particular textual portraits<sup>102</sup> are given the status of objective, unmediated 'experience', and the process and politics of textual production overlooked, their truth is guaranteed. Gail Omvedt writes, 'International Women's Year brought, for me, a wealth of encounters with Indian women of all classes, and turned my research into *an experience with Indian women . . .*'.<sup>103</sup> The unquestionables operate precisely at this point, where research is transformed into 'an experience' that is beyond all critical interrogation. It is here, when experience is invoked as a given, that censorship mechanisms limiting what can be said come into being.

The way 'experience' is produced in the texts as an uncon-

<sup>97</sup> Omvedt, p. 155.

<sup>98</sup> See Jeffery, pp. 2 & 13.

<sup>99</sup> Omvedt, p. 2.

<sup>100</sup> Davies, p. i.

<sup>101</sup> Omvedt, p. 6.

<sup>102</sup> See *Manushi* or the portraits in M. Mukhopadhyay, *Silver Shackles: Women and Development in India* (1984).

<sup>103</sup> Omvedt, p. 5 (my emphasis).

structed, natural thing that simply happens or occurs, makes the discourse blind to certain possibilities. Gail Omvedt's reporting of her 'experiences' in Bori Arab illustrates this point. After having lunch, she wanders outside to find 'the women and children listening to some worker and peasant songs recorded on [her] tape recorder'. After further discussion, she visits the school. Note her comments which end the chapter entitled 'Women have to do double work: Encounter with an Agricultural Labourer'.

I face a class of young girls and boys, many from poor peasant and agricultural labourer, and Dalit families. The questions they ask show their underlying concerns. Is there inflation in America? What about racism? Finally a boy from the back of the room who was one of those sitting around the edge of the women's meeting, rises to plead, 'Play the songs.'

He means the revolutionary music I have on my tapes. I try to catch ~~Bhimrao's eye~~: is it alright, here in the school? He nods, he seems to think it's a good idea. And so, with some trepidation, in the schoolroom of a village dominated by seven rich landlords where the poor have not found any strength of organization but only 'endless sorrows', I play a song of revolt, written by a male agricultural labourer from another district and sung by another woman labourer:

The blazing torch in our hands,  
The red sun in the east,  
With the gleaming scythe of unity  
We will cut the throats of the rich!<sup>104</sup>

This extract functions in several ways. It sets itself up as a simple account of 'what happened' in Bori Arab. A non-complicit reading, however, reveals the careful selection process involved in the way these events are presented as information. The story, like any narrative, makes sense because of what it excludes. It operates by channelling the reader into a single interpretation of the 'experience' and closing off the text to a whole range of interpretations which may or may not be equally valid.

The characters in this story are introduced in the opening sentence; they are not the children from the seven rich landlords. The protagonist is the narrator who orchestrates the events, answers questions and plays the songs. It is her feelings of apprehension and exhilaration that the reader follows. Because she tells us that these children from poor peasant or Dalit families have an underlying concern about inflation in America,<sup>105</sup> the information does not

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>105</sup> I have ignored the ambiguity of this statement about 'underlying concerns'.

seem incongruous. She describes the boy's request for songs from the tape recorder as a 'plea', creating the impression that there has been awakened in him 'a revolutionary spirit'. This perception is reinforced by the quick pace of the last few sentences, culminating in the cry 'We will cut the throats of the rich!' The textual fabrication is such that this revolutionary cry is no longer linked with the tape recorder but is attached to the poor children in the classroom, particularly the boy who has made the initial request. This call is universalized by the reference to the 'male agricultural labourer from another district' who wrote the song and the 'woman labourer' who sang it. The desire for revolution is made to cross region and gender. The story is organized so that it is read in a specific way. Why, for example, has Omvedt chosen to finish on the last line of what may be the first verse of the song or perhaps its chorus? Why hasn't the whole song been included? The answer would be that she wants her 'experience' to be read as a sign that the spirit of revolt is smouldering away in the children of the poor. This may be the case but equally it is a figure woven by the discourse.<sup>106</sup> Just because 'what happened' in the school is presented as her experience, what she saw with her own eyes, does not make it incontrovertibly true and objective. Perhaps the boy asked to hear the songs for reasons unknown to us. Perhaps the students do not have an underlying concern with inflation in America but asked questions prompted by other thoughts. Perhaps not. Nevertheless, the discourse censors such contingencies to produce the single interpretation required by an ideological system.

Implicit in the textual construction of 'experience' is a hypothesized complicit woman reader. The discourse appeals to this woman's 'experience' as the ultimate gauge for the validity of what it claims. Of all the 'truth-effects' operating in the discourse, this is supposed to provide the absolute seal of the accuracy and rightness of the feminist project. The woman reader is often insinuated in the 'we' of the texts. For example, when Davies observes, 'We all experience sexism in our daily lives',<sup>107</sup> she does not have a male reader in mind, nor does Omvedt when she defines her aim as giving 'women in other parts of the world some understanding' of woman in India.<sup>108</sup> The assumption is that one's womanness automatically

<sup>106</sup> I do not mean a deliberate distortion.

<sup>107</sup> Davies, p. i.

<sup>108</sup> Omvedt, p. 6.

makes it easy as a reader to identify with the experiences of the women represented in the texts. This position has been challenged by some feminist literary critics who view reading as 'a *learned* activity, which like many other learned interpretive strategies in our society is inevitably sex-coded and gender-inflected'.<sup>109</sup> It is therefore possible for a woman to read as a man, and vice versa. Unfortunately this is not how reading is seen in feminist studies of Third World women. In fact, the premise that the Western woman reader from an intellectual élite can identify with the suffering of a *bidi* roller in Calcutta or an adivasi woman making cow-pats in Maharashtra is perhaps the most highly problematic assumption on which the call for an international sisterhood is based. As Jonathan Culler points out, 'to ask a woman to read as a woman is in fact a double or divided request. It appeals to the condition of being a woman as if it were a given and simultaneously urges that this condition be created or achieved'.<sup>110</sup>

Without wishing to over-schematize the way the category of experience functions in the discourse, it is possible to simplify it in point form.

- (1) Experience of the subject under investigation = an event which illustrates feminist concerns (i.e. 'suffering', 'struggle').
- (2) Experience of the investigating subject = positive and revelatory.
- (3) Experience of the hypothesized woman reader = identification.

It is interesting that the woman reader is urged *not* to identify with the investigating subject—with whom it could be assumed that she shared the same language and culture if not similar 'experiences'—but instead is directed to the subject under investigation, with whom she shares only her womanness. The woman reader is positioned alongside the investigator, but is asked to identify with those being investigated. The discourse creates the illusion that (1) and (3) are in a direct relationship and that if (2) is there at all, it is simply to reveal, like a window, the direct experiences of (1). This impression is maintained despite the language of feminist individualism used to described the investigator's 'extraordinary experiences', where the 'I' of the texts is simultaneously emphasized and

<sup>109</sup> A. Kolodny, quoted in J. Culler's *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*, London, 1983, p. 51.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

de-emphasized. What the manifest discourse does not disclose is that in many respects the 'I' is the central subject of the texts. What sustains the impression that the 'I' is invisible is a range of textual conventions already mentioned: the notion of women speaking for themselves; journalistic techniques designed to make the reader feel she is really there; hiding the retrospectivity of the narrative; the idea that the investigator was invited to do the research ('this is a book forced on me by the women themselves'<sup>111</sup>) and the unquestioned status of 'experience' in the discourse. If the 'not said'—that experience is a contingent, subjective, textually-woven fiction—is said, then the belief that feminist concerns are international contradicts the very standards the discourse itself sets. Only if 'experience' as a 'never said' is taken to be a series of actual observations and facts beyond question can feminism claim to be universal.

Adulatory terms are often used to describe particular groups feminist research investigates. Tribal or peasant women are hailed for their strength, resistance or militancy, and the cultures these groups inhabit are portrayed as unusual and exotic. Vivid details are provided on how people dress ('the women in colourful red, green and blue saris'<sup>112</sup>) as well as the setting for the investigator's experience (the heat, smell, tastes and physical environment), the West being a constant point of comparison; the norm by which the exceptional is judged. In the manifest discourse, the West (or the West within) is described as commonplace, somehow less than the culture being represented. This is a deliberate inversion of the Orientalist perspective on the inferiority of the East; an attempt to dissociate feminism from such discourses. India, the Third World, or tribal women on the other hand, are seen as important because they offer vital insights and answers not to be found in the West or the Westernized modernist. However, this valorization rarely includes all women or all Indian women, nor does it romanticize everything about 'the Other'. What is 'not-said' is that behind the unqualified commendation of any particular group lies a whole system of values which, in the final analysis, serves to divide women, thereby undercutting the discourse's claim for a universal sisterhood.

One stage in the history of marxist thought (and not in Marx's own thought) now mirrored in feminism was the quest for the *most oppressed*. The search is for the model example of all the ideology

<sup>111</sup> Jeffery, p. 14.

<sup>112</sup> Omvedt, p. 24; see also p. 115.

stands for. The more oppressed, the 'truer' the subject. Omvedt finds her target in some of the tribal groups she 'encounters', celebrating, in one instance, the fact that a particular woman with whom she is fascinated comes from one of India's 'most oppressed sections'.<sup>113</sup> According to this formula, mapped in the cosmology of the Left, the poorer or the most oppressed equals the more militant.<sup>114</sup> It would seem that a hierarchy can exist within feminism which is based more on class than gender and which corresponds to a descending scale of 'realness' from the worst to the least oppressed. The more 'other' some women appear, the more elevated they become. Note the description of middle-class women as 'sheltered children of the rich', and as being 'like caged birds, excited and fluttering, running around the house eager to talk'.<sup>115</sup> These ornithographic metaphors signifying frivolity and femininity are in marked contrast to the robust, solid, vigorous images of tribal women. 'They' are sturdy, and independent whereas middle-class women are described in slightly derisive tones as '*wives of government clerks* who were members of a local "women's club"'<sup>116</sup> For example, 'the city girls' voices are cracking with the cold, but Tanubai and the other village singers shrug it off . . . Her singing style itself, a vigorous, belting ballad style, is for me more reminiscent of the black musical tradition in the U.S. than any other Indian music I have heard.'<sup>117</sup> Tribal women are always 'tall, and magnificently striking'.<sup>118</sup> Their culture is typified as being more egalitarian and less puritanical than Hindu and Muslim culture. The discourse claims that if they had been left in their 'pure state' they would have a subsistence mode of production, with no territory, no vertical stratification, a symmetrical division of labour and a complete absence of poverty.<sup>119</sup> They are described as more 'free spirited' and 'collective'.<sup>120</sup>

There is much of the 'noble savage' in such laudatory characterizations. The downgrading of middle-class women (who are always there for an unfavourable comparison) is in stark contrast to the

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. i (my emphasis).

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>119</sup> Maria Mies, 'Capitalist Development and Subsistence Reproduction: Rural Women in India', *B.C.A.S.*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1984, pp. 3-13.

<sup>120</sup> Omvedt, p. 93.

idea of a universal sisterhood. The particulars of the admiration of the investigating subject very much depend on the feminism from which she speaks. Omvedt's marxist feminism shapes the system of values she employs to see some as unquestionably good and others bad. Mody and Mhatre, however, use a liberal framework (in spite of the radical feminist sounding title of the article) as the basis for their valorization of the 'modern'. Take Janabai again as an example. She has all the right credentials, crushing poverty, infant deaths, beatings by her husband, yet she is dismissed as superstitious, feudal and contributing to the oppression of women. Shevanti, on the other hand, who is much better-off economically and socially, is praised in glowing terms. 'If Janabai is part of the problem', they write, 'Shevanti is part of the solution'.

She is a remarkably independent and outspoken young woman and has waged a consistent struggle in her own life against the forces oppressing her . . . Shevanti sees education and knowledge of vocational skills for woman not just as an economic necessity but as a prerequisite to an independent life. She seems to be able to do without marriage as necessary for establishing her identity as an individual . . .<sup>121</sup>

She is made positive in the discourse because she has embraced bourgeois, liberal values: education and individualism. The extract even goes on to mention her desire for greater privacy in the Bombay slum where she lives. What is important in determining whether something is given the status of being 'unquestionably good' in the discourse is whether what the subject signifies corresponds to the semiotic system of the interviewer.

The constant then in the discursive pattern of organization has little to do with Indian women or other such subjects under investigation. Once again, what is valued as real is that which most closely reflects the thought-world of the researcher. The arbitrary nature of the sign makes it possible for tribal women, for example, to stand for anything: utopian natural democracy, sexual freedom or devastating oppression.

However, it is not what women do that is important, or who they happen to be, but what their actions *mean* in a particular context. The constructed meanings vary. Indian women, at the moment, stand for something positive in the contemporary feminist dis-

<sup>121</sup> Mody and Mhatre, p. 54.

course, the Third World Woman being a particularly 'hallowed signified'.<sup>122</sup> In Katherine Mayo's day Indian women were viewed as a scale by which Indian civilization was measured. Yet these two perspectives are generated from the same discourse; the discourse of Orientalism. Despite reversing the Orientalist problematic the terms of inferiority and superiority are still meted out by those observing the culture; in defining what is good and bad in Indian society it is their cultural hegemony that is maintained. Valorization as a strategy aimed at dissociating feminism from the imperialist West does not work. Once the language of 'more than', 'less than', 'better than', 'worse than' comes into play, with only one side making the rules, the relationship between knowledge and power becomes more explicit. This can and has been interpreted as yet another form of racism.

At the heart of all the studies discussed in this critique is a belief that they serve the purpose of fostering mutual understanding between women of the world. This is expressed as shedding new light on the question of the position of women in India,<sup>123</sup> of showing 'women from many countries stitching together a truly international feminist consensus based on their experiences in many different cultures',<sup>124</sup> or as building 'a genuine international sisterhood, on the basis of mutual understanding'.<sup>125</sup> But while this international sisterhood needs to be created ('the following collection aims to build some of the links needed for the development of women's liberation on a truly international scale'<sup>126</sup>) by connecting through discourse the 'diversity of women's experience', it is also viewed as something that already exists in the 'deep-rooted similarities'<sup>127</sup> between women's experience, and which is simply waiting to be revealed.

Women can, feminism asserts, learn from the variation and diversity of the lives of women in other cultures, but in the interplay between sameness and difference in studies of Third World women there is only sameness. The experiences of Indian women are shown

<sup>122</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives', *History and Theory*, vol. xxiv, no. 3, 1985, p. 247.

<sup>123</sup> Jeffery, p. 13.

<sup>124</sup> McIntosh, p. 774.

<sup>125</sup> See J. Everett, 'The Upsurge of Women's Activism in India', *Frontiers*, vol. vii, no. 2, p. 18.

<sup>126</sup> Davies, p. i.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. i.

to be just like the experiences of all women in the world.<sup>128</sup>

Despite the acknowledgement of minor variations, such as the way women dress, cook their food, etc., the essence of the 'experience of being a woman' is changeless. The process of communicating these experiences, then, becomes one of endless repetition. There can be no 'new light' shed on the question of women in India. If it is accepted that the currency of experience retains its value because it circulates the same experience, the question of whose experience it is and who gains from learning about it must be asked.

The texts make sense because they are filled with a series of reference points from Western (or Westernized) culture: 'The international debate on housework which was initiated by the women's movement';<sup>129</sup> Berkeley and the 'big years' of student unrest;<sup>130</sup> Girl Scout camps;<sup>131</sup> the civil rights movement; 'rather a kind of combination of rally and encounter group';<sup>132</sup> and 'more and more, sexuality is becoming a leading issue amongst Third World women'.<sup>133</sup> Paradoxically, the Other is created from the familiar landscape of the investigating subject's imaginative geography. Even if the portraits of tribal women are generated by Indian feminists, the same rules are followed and the otherizing process applies.

The fact that *all* women are placed under a feminist umbrella while the focus is on women with least access to a shared feminist vocabulary (tribal women and Indian peasants for example) further complicates problems inherent in universalist feminist notions. The claim that women throughout the world benefit from the sharing of their experiences is severely diminished by the manifest discourse's definition of what is shared and between whom. The question of who benefits becomes rhetorical when the never-said is said. This problematic relationship between knowledge and power in the discourse is summed up in Kaminibai's comments on Omvedt's research. Their inclusion in *We Will Smash This Prison* creates a moment of self-criticism in the text.

She'll write something worth reading and writing, but it will be in thin, small letters and we won't be able to read it, not at all, there will be no profit or loss to us. (General laughter). Is this true or false *bai*, what I am

<sup>128</sup> See Omvedt, p. 50.      <sup>129</sup> Mies, p. 3.

<sup>130</sup> Omvedt, p. 1.      <sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 102.      <sup>133</sup> Davies, p. v.

saying to you? Understand, we will show our difficulties to you, you send from there some paper, and some educated person, some children, will read to us, and we know nothing, whatever they tell us or explain to us we will understand. If we even have the time.<sup>134</sup>

In challenging the hierarchy of categories that is recycled in feminist texts on Third World women, particularly the unquestioned status of 'experience', I have touched on a problem which is at the heart of the feminist debate. This is the problem of the uneasy relationship between feminism and history. While marxism historicizes even the origins of oppression, feminism is as yet undecided on whether women's oppression can be seen to have an historical origin. Because of this indecision, the 'universals' in feminism have an uncertain epistemological status. One project of this essay has been to highlight the inconsistencies in the feminist discourse that arise from this uncertainty.

I am not arguing that these inconsistencies can be ironed out by an act of will. Feminism without a universal concept of itself and its adversary would lack the premise on which a feminist politics is based. Such a premise prevents women's protests from dissolving into individual, fragmented and empirical acts. I therefore recognize the immediate 'political' need for universals. Yet, a 'universal' that has not been sufficiently thought out creates problems for the development of feminist theory. As Alice Jardine has said, capturing the feminist dilemma on this point, to universalize 'woman' as beyond culture is to return to anatomical definitions of sexual identity, but to see woman solely as a cultural construction, as a metaphor 'means risking once again the absence of women as subjects . . .'.<sup>135</sup>

A theoretical orthodoxy which could, in the short run, inform and support a feminist politics is no resolution to the problem that Jardine mentions. It may well be a political choice for us to accept at a theoretical level the 'undecidable' nature of the relationship between women's oppression and history. Yet, as I have argued here, the risk in such a choice is that we are then unable to purge our language of axioms of imperialism. Another theoretical choice available is to force the tension between feminist thought and 'history' in

<sup>134</sup> Omvedt, p. 18.

<sup>135</sup> A Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (New York, 1985), p. 37.

search of an approach that can critically engage within itself all tendencies to create closures at the same time as it fights orthodoxies outside.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>136</sup> I would like to particularly thank Dipesh Chakrabarty for his generous intellectual contribution to this paper. The writings and comments of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have also stimulated much of my thinking here. Thanks are extended to Ranajit Guha and Pat Grimshaw for their detailed comments on an earlier draft and to Sandra Zurbo and Rosemary Smith.

# Response to Julie Stephens

SUSIE THARU

One welcomes a study of the politics of representation as one has welcomed feminist critiques of cultural artefacts and Said's magisterial *Orientalism*. However, several problems, many of them evident in Julie Stephens' exercise, attend such an effort, especially when it seeks to analyse a subaltern as against a hegemonic or dominant discourse. 'Feminist Fictions' does make some useful observations and is harmless enough as an initial, if somewhat mechanical, exploration of new-found tools and concepts, but its theoretical formulations are prematurely applied and altogether inadequate. Set up, therefore, as an analysis and judgement of 'contemporary feminist discourse', it is politically irresponsible.

Since I have deliberately chosen in these comments to focus on major areas of disagreement, I want also to say that there are major areas of concurrence. I broadly accept the important theoretical ground that the article charts out and I hope in the discussion to extend rather than deny its possibilities. There are many instances where I find it difficult to agree with particular formulations and dissociate myself totally with the tone and the conclusions, but regard the arguments that lead up to them as generally valid. Though the discussion is marred by a tendency to chase, often at the cost of the main theme, down by-lanes to catch a writer out and establish her duplicity or bad faith (e.g. 'Omvedt knows very well it is a village council building when she writes this (she visits it after lunch that day).'), I have little to add to Stephens' powerful demonstration of how much the field remains the institutional site from which some feminist discourses have spoken of Third World women, or indeed how deeply and subtly imbricated with Orientalist assumptions these discourses can be.

However, as I said earlier, I have several problems with the arti-

cle. Let me begin with the troubles in the theoretical engine which, despite being new, is belching a great deal of smoke. Stephens invokes the concept of representation/ideology as discursively *produced*, rejecting, as it were, the notion of ideology as an expression of class interest or representation merely as a reflection of reality. One of the reasons why such an approach seemed a major advance over earlier expressive and totalizing ways of thinking was that coupled with the idea of 'relative autonomy' it opened up the possibility of understanding the ideological as an articulation of complex, sometimes contradictory and unevenly determining practices. As a consequence a theory of struggle *within the ideological* became possible. In Stephens' analysis, however, the multi-accentuality of the sign, its plurality or overdetermination, is closed off and a kind of 'structural causality', tailor-made for caricature, established. For all practical purposes the domain of ideology is reduced to the domain of a monolithically conceived 'dominant ideology'. This is evident in the statement of purpose in which feminism is reduced to a functional support for Orientalism, but more so in the sense her argument exudes of having arrived at an adequate analysis once Omvedt or Kishwar or Jeffery is shown up as 'Orientalist' or 'Nationalist' and labelled as such (Nationalism of course being very simply another face of Orientalism). The labels are no longer 'bourgeois' or 'semi-feudal' but they are labels all the same.

Once all practices are conceptualized as buttresses for a given dominant system of representation, the field is rendered inert. The new totality may be Spinozian rather than Hegelian, but notions of contradiction and struggle are as consistently undermined here as they were in the earlier conceptions. Obviously the discourses of our time will constitute our worlds as much as they do our subjectivities. It is not difficult to accept that feminism 'collides or colludes', to use Stephens' somewhat unhappy phrase, with Orientalism—as it obviously will with other contemporary discourses that construct class and gender. But to suggest that that collusion is a total or adequate characterization of what takes place is to let the contestatory nature of feminist or subaltern discourses slip through a theoretical sieve too gross for such fine gold. Stephens' methodology is peculiarly insensitive to the subversions, elaborations, hybridizations, transformations, realignments or reappropriations that do take place within oppositional discourses and must be taken into account by any historically informed analysis. What

should have been staged as a *mise-en-scene* of a struggle is reduced to a narrative that accepts as inevitable, even as it bemoans, the victory of the Great White Patriarch (a personage, by the way, produced and firmly enthroned by Stephens' discourse).

Part of the problem arises from a reading of Orientalism itself (not encouraged but not actively discouraged, either, by Said's book) as a self generating, formalist system. Within such an ahistorical, structuralist scheme all specific instances can be explained as an effect of the system's general concepts, and historical configurations or events are merely a contingency. Foucault's critique of 'formalization' is too well known now to need much rehearsal. But it does seem imperative that if we (Indians, feminists, etc.) are to use the ideas of *Orientalism* to analyse *subaltern* discourses, we should strain against a reading of it as a coercive totalist system and doggedly hold on to a more historicized reading of it as a 'regularity' of discursive practices. The problematic of Orientalism, then, is to be understood not as a pollutant that a discourse must be cleansed of, but as an enabling heuristic device that refines and extends our understanding both of power and of resistance.

Stephens does, towards the end of her essay, gesture vaguely in the direction of history as a problem which she sees as lying at the 'heart' of the feminist debate. In contrast to Marxism, she writes, feminism is undecided (fie, ye fickle women!) on whether women's oppression should be regarded as having an historical origin. But might we not do well to lay the essentially teleological question of origins aside, as we also lay aside the 'vantage point of an absolute distance' that makes the idea of origin possible? For only then can we take the heterogeneous history of the struggles that went into making these discourses seriously. Or, to put it in other words, only then can we (if we so desire, of course) illuminate not only the burdens they carry but what is at stake in them.

Closely, perhaps inextricably, tied with the need to historicize is the need to place the discourse in a specific socio-political context. No discourse operates in a vacuum, and neither its meaning nor the subject-positions it constitutes can be simply read off from its discursive strategies. Yet Stephens casually prises texts totally loose of their contexts and recreates them in a subdued global light in which these efforts are reduced either to collaboration or to a colourless flailing in the face of an Implacable Absolute. If Omvedt or Kishwar are to be read in the context in which they wrote, then they have to

be read not only in relation to the discourses they inherit and reproduce, but in relation to the other discourses they align or engage with, and the specific rearticulations they are forcing.

That on the one hand. What we also have to bear in mind is that a 'context' is not just a context for writing, it is also a context for the reader, who is not merely inscribed monotonically into a text, but is a subject in history, living in a specific socio-political context. In other words, a reader lives in a network of discursive and symbolic systems and always exceeds the subject implied by a specific text because s/he as reader-subject is also placed by a heterogeneity of other cultural systems. Since this question has been debated at length elsewhere I will not pursue it here. Omvedt's feminist reader can refuse the complicity the text demands of her, just as the women in the Calcutta audience that January afternoon so vociferously refused the subjectivity Stephens' text constituted for us. ➤

The argument is also marred by gross overgeneralization that compounds the totalist effects of its theory. Four collections, all published around the same time, three from London (Davies 1978, Jeffery 1979, Omvedt 1980) and one from New York (Huston 1979) account for over 70 per cent of the footnoted references to the discourses Stephens analyses. Of the six references to *Manushi*, which is a bi-monthly, appearing alternate months in Hindi and English, five are taken from a selection published in book form by Zed Press, and of those three refer to p. 47, one to p. 46. Perhaps these are the only texts about feminism in India that Stephens has ready access to, even in 1986, located as she is in Melbourne, but it doesn't seem to restrain her from making sweeping claims on almost every page about 'feminism' and about 'non-western' women. Take for example: 'The institutional site from which feminism speaks of Indian women is "the field"', or, 'as feminism weaves its picture of non-western women, so it undoes many of its own aims', and in conclusion: 'In challenging the hierarchy of categories that is recycled in feminist texts on Third World women . . .'. And as feminism is featured thus as a homogeneous universal its construct, the Third World woman, equally monolithic (sometimes physically exhibited, we are told, at conferences in Australia), emerges like a figure in an animated cartoon. Stephens does briefly acknowledge the limits of her exercise as she begins, and makes fairly well-defined, moderate claims: 'What is addressed is the overlap between Indian and Western feminist portraits of Indian women'. The overlap, she admits,

'covers only a section of the literature' but the claim that it is 'large and significant enough to warrant discussion' seems to be a sanction for all scruples to be set aside from the next paragraph onwards.

*Where, and for whom*, I want to ask, are these four (or six) books a 'large and significant' body of work? I live in India and have had some aspirations to feminism, but of the four main sources I had read only one. I had occasionally met references to Jeffery and Davies. I came across Huston for the first time in Stephens' paper, which is also where I first heard of Mody and Mhatre. Subsequently I asked friends and searched through the libraries in Hyderabad (which has three universities and two large research libraries) and was able to locate Davies. It had been bought in 1980, but had never been checked out by anybody. Yet every week there are three or four major pieces I cut out from newspapers and journals. The paper bags on my shelves are crammed with cyclostyled articles, circulars, pamphlets, newsletters, souvenirs, appeals, announcements, investigative reports, judgements on cases filed in courts. None of the names that appear and reappear in this collection, except Kishwar perhaps, are those Stephens studies so elaborately. The point I'm trying not so subtly to make is that perhaps Huston and Co. are important. Perhaps they *are* the texts that help open up the problem of representation in the context of Indian Studies abroad and no doubt some of the questions that arise are also of interest here. But to speak of these texts as though they constituted a timeless, universal 'feminism' and determined the limits of 'feminist' struggle the world over is ludicrous.

That brings me to what I regard as a major problem with Stephens' piece. As a critic, Stephens herself would appear to have no stakes in the game, no commitments anywhere. The third person mode of the exposition maintains a sterile, 'objective' distance from the discourses it dissects. The opening declaration of purpose identifies neither with feminists, nor with Third World women (the Third World feminist is, for Stephens' text, an unspeakable hybrid) and poses its thesis as a theoretical one: 'The following is an exploration of a textual body of knowledge on Indian women with particular reference to the problem of the unmediated association between representation and reality . . .'. I feel it is the lack of personal investment that allows Stephens to pose the problem of feminism and writing so reductively. There would seem to be little left of *Manushi* (not that it would worry *Manushi*) after she has run it

down to the ground of her argument, and the study, by the author's own admission, fails to inform a feminist, or an anti-Imperialist politics, a problem, she seems to find no difficulty in declaring, which can be traced back to feminism's own inadequate theory: Within its problematic feminist politics remains a 'dilemma'. A concession is made: 'I therefore recognize the immediate "political" need for universals', but is hastily withdrawn, for politics is an irritant to this theory: 'Yet a "universal" that has not been sufficiently thought out creates problems for the development of a feminist theory.'

Unfortunately the analysis does not merely hover thus, at the edge of the political. It degenerates into a moral stick to beat feminists of all hues. We are accused of duplicity: 'it is surprising to find feminist texts *blind* to their own image-making and *laying claim* to . . .' (my italics); of contrivance: 'not to do so would foster charges of imperialism'; of collusion; of not being 'cleansed' of an Orientalist problematic; of being unable to 'purge our language'. Add to this unfortunate (and pre-theoretical) phraseology the dismissiveness of the tone and (if I may coin a phrase) the 'annoyance potential' of Stephens' piece is multiplied. Feminism's use of 'experience' and the slogan 'the personal is the political' is called a 'rebellious inversion'. Madhu Kishwar's discussion of Gandhi is dismissively summarized as: 'However, one's Indianness can be restored and liberation achieved by the rejection of the modernist notion of Sita . . . and the embracing of a nationalist one: Gandhi's Sita.' A large part of the women's movement in India is reduced to an absurdity in: 'The portrait of Indian women drawn by feminists such as Omvedt is the militant tribal activist breaking through police lines in the forefront of marches, or the toiling woman, marching through villages, singing and shouting about "wife beating, dowry, rape as well as economic and tribal oppression".' The supercilious distance from which Stephens views and passes judgement on the muddy world in which we feminists live and fight, 'entangled' in nationalism and not 'purged' of the axioms of Imperialism and so on, quite takes one's breath away.

# The Colonial Construction of 'Communalism': British Writings on Banaras in the Nineteenth Century

GYANENDRA PANDEY

Communal strife, or conflict between people of different religious persuasions, was represented by the British colonial regime in India as one of the most distinctive features of Indian society, past and present. The communal riot narrative was perhaps the most important colonialist statement on the nature of politics in this society. In this essay I investigate the making of that narrative.<sup>1</sup>

In a colonialist reading of history that had become dominant by the end of the nineteenth century, 'communalism' was seen as the special mark of the Indian section of the 'Orient'. This particular reading of Indian history was distinguished not only by its periodization in terms of the European experience ('ancient', 'medieval', 'modern'), nor simply by its use of communal—more specifically, religious—categories to differentiate these periods of Indian history (or, at least, the first two of them: the 'Hindu' and the 'Muslim'). This historical reconstruction was characterized also by an emptying out of all history—in terms of the specific variations of time, place, class, issue—from the political experience of the people, and the identification of religion, or the religious community, as the moving force of all Indian politics. The communal riot narrative served to substantiate this reading of history.

Towards the end of the 1920s the Government of India drew up elaborate lists of Hindu–Muslim riots that had occurred in the country in the recent past. From one of these we learn that there

<sup>1</sup> An elaboration of some of these themes will be found in my forthcoming book, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, of which this essay forms a part.

were 112 serious 'disturbances' between 1923 and 1927 which left approximately 450 people dead and 5000 more wounded. Nineteen-twenty-nine produced a carnage in Bombay, 1931 one more in Kanpur. Official statistics put the number of casualties in Bombay at 184 killed and 948 wounded. In Kanpur, several hundreds were killed and about 80,000 people are said to have left the city by rail alone on the first day of a conflagration that raged for three days.<sup>2</sup>

The record of Hindu–Muslim strife was also extended further back, to the beginnings of colonial rule, as one can see from Table 1.

TABLE 1: *Government Statement of Major Hindu-Muslims Riots, 1800–1920*

Year	Place	Observations by Officials
1809	Banaras	'Grave Benares riots'; several hundred persons killed, some 50 mosques destroyed
1871–2	Bareilly	'Serious riots'
1885	Lahore & Karnal	
1886	Delhi	'The great riots'
1889	Dera Ghazi Khan	
1891	Palakod	
1893	Azamgarh	'Grave outbreaks over a large area of country'
	Bombay	'Very serious Muharram riots'; 80 persons killed
1910	Peshawar	
1912	Ayodhya-Faizabad	
1913	Agra	
1917	Shahabad	'Baqr 'Id disturbances which recalled the Azamgarh disturbances of 1893 and which are among the most serious which have occurred at any time since the British connection with the country'.
1918	Katarpur village (Saharanpur district)	30 Muslims killed, 60 or more injured; all Muslim houses in the village burnt

Source: L/P&J/7/132; *Report of the Indian Statutory Commission, Volume IV* (1930), pp. 96–7.

<sup>2</sup> (India Office Library and Records; hereafter IOL) L/P & J/7/132, 'Communal Disorders' (memorandum prepared by the Government of India for the Indian

It is not difficult to add to these official lists. For the period 1800 to 1920 alone, a recent study speaks of 'riots and communal conflicts in many north Indian cities in the 1830s and again in the 1850s,' and refers to Hindu–Muslim strife in Lucknow, for instance, in 1843, 1853 and 1856.<sup>3</sup> There are records of clashes between Hindus and Muslims in Bareilly in 1837 (in addition to the riots of 1871–2 mentioned in Table 1); in Faizabad-Ayodhya in 1856; and, to take the two most important cloth-producing centres of Azamgarh district as another example, in Mubarakpur in 1813, 1834, 1842 and 1904, and in Maunath Bhanjan (or Mau) in 1806 as well as on several occasions from the 1860s onwards.

Again, the bloodshed at the Baqr'Id in 1893 in Azamgarh and other districts of eastern UP and western Bihar led to violent conflict between groups of Muslims in Bombay, Junagadh and Rangoon as well.<sup>4</sup> Bombay was witness to another round of fighting between Hindus and Muslims at the Muharram of 1911, and there was a serious riot in Calcutta in 1918—partly it appears in retaliation against the Hindu attacks on Muslims in Shahabad district the year before.<sup>5</sup>

If this is the sometimes neglected history of Hindu–Muslim strife before the 1920s, evidence of Hindu–Muslim 'riots' can also be found for the pre-colonial period. Scholars have written of riots in Gujarat in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and again of 'sporadic' local conflict in Banaras, for example, from the 1750s.<sup>6</sup>

Statutory Commission, 1928), and 'Notes' of 19–20 May 1931. The memorandum observed that for a casualty list of the same order as that in Kanpur one had to go back to the 'grave Benares riots' of 1809.

<sup>3</sup> C. A. Bayly, 'The Pre-History of "Communalism"? Religious Conflict in India, 1700–1860', *Modern Asian Studies*, 19, 2 (1985).

<sup>4</sup> Burma was administered by the Government of India until 1935: hence reports of riots in Rangoon appear together with the reports of riots in different parts of India.

<sup>5</sup> J. McLane, *Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress* (Princeton, 1977), pp. 320–1; J. Masselos, 'Power in the Bombay "Moholla", 1904–15', *South Asia*, 6 (Dec. 1976); K. Macpherson, *The Muslim Microcosm: Calcutta, 1918–35* (Wiesbaden, 1974), pp. 37, 40.

<sup>6</sup> S. A. A. Rizvi, *Shah Waliullah and His Times* (Canberra, 1980), p. 197; L. Subramanian, 'Capital and Crowd in a Declining Asian Port City: the Anglo-Bania Order and the Surat Riots of 1795', *Modern Asian Studies*, 19, 2 (1985); Bayly, 'Pre-History of "Communalism"', p. 197. In regard to Banaras, however, it is worth pointing out that officials making detailed enquiries after the 1809 outbreak

Indeed the list of Hindu–Muslim riots in colonial and pre-colonial India lengthens all the time with lengthening research—as indeed it must if ‘riots’ are what one is looking for.

It is possible for the researcher, however, to do more than just look for riots or simply delineate their differing contexts (though colonialist historiography was not particularly guilty of the latter crime). It is possible, and necessary, also to ask how reports of communal strife were received by contemporary and subsequent observers, what meanings were derived from them, and what place they were assigned in different representations of the changing colonial world. How did colonialist observers ‘read’ the history of Hindu–Muslim strife that they dug up in the course of their attempts to come to grips with Indian society? A close examination of the evidence relating to the ‘grave’ Banaras riots of 1809, which figure prominently in colonial diagnoses of the social and political condition of India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, may prove to be instructive.

## II

The *District Gazetteer* of Banaras compiled in 1907 introduces the 1809 riots thus: ‘The only disturbance of the public peace [in Banaras during the first half of the nineteenth century] occurred in 1809 and the following year, when the city experienced one of those convulsions which had so frequently occurred in the past owing to the religious antagonism of the Hindu and Musalman sections of the population.’ This comment is followed by a one and a half page description of the events of 1809, after which the compiler of the *Gazetteer* remarks: ‘A curious sequel of the riots was a feud that sprang up between the military and the police. This originated, no doubt, in religious differences, but these appear to have been dropped in the course of time and a long succession of affrays ensued, with Hindus and Musalmans indiscriminately mingled on either side.’ The entry goes on: ‘The trouble subsided with a partial reorganization of the city police in October 1810; but before peace had been restored fresh riots arose with the introduction of the house-tax under Regulation XV of 1810, and it was again found necessary

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reported that there had been no notable outbreak of violence between Hindus and Muslims in the city for the previous hundred years.

to station troops throughout the city to repress the popular disorder till the withdrawal of the obnoxious measure in the ensuing year.<sup>7</sup>

This was the distilled account, as it were, of the history of Banaras in the troubled days before the soothing influence of British rule and the British sense of fair play had 'civilized' the city. It was an account that was carried into the assessment of the constitutional and political condition of India in the 1920s and 1930s, and it has found its way into the history books.<sup>8</sup> Thus, a memorandum drawn up for submission to the Indian Statutory Commission of 1928 pointed to the 'grave Benares riots' of 1809 as evidence of the usual state of Hindu–Muslim coexistence, describing them as 'one of those convulsions which had frequently occurred in the past owing to the religious antagonism of the Hindu and Moslem sections of the population'.<sup>9</sup>

This particular description is of course lifted straight from the account contained in the *Banaras Gazetteer* of 1907, quoted above. Notice that scarcely a word is altered in the text: and yet the change of context completely transforms the statement. What applied to a *particular* city—the experience of 'convulsions' in the past and the 'religious antagonism' of the local Hindus and Muslims—now applies to the country as a whole. Banaras becomes the essence of India, the history of Banaras the history of India.<sup>10</sup>

What makes Banaras stand in for India is not the 'typical' character of Banaras as a habitation, nor the 'representative' character of the strife of 1809. It is the magnitude of the riots of 1809—the 'grave Benares riots,' paralleled we are told only after a century and a quarter in the Kanpur outbreak of 1931—and the fact that they are among the first to be recorded in the colonial period, i.e. most nearly

<sup>7</sup> H. R. Nevill, *Benares: A Gazetteer, Being Vol. xxvi of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh* (Lucknow, 1921; Preface dated Dec. 1907), pp. 207–9.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. M. McPherson 'The Origin and Growth of Communal Antagonism, especially between Hindus and Muhammadans, and the Communal Award', in J. Cummings, ed., *Political India* (London, 1932); R. Coupland, *The Constitutional Problem in India* (London, 1944), pt 1, p 29; A.S. Altekar, *History of Benares: from pre-historic times to the present day* (Banaras, 1937), pp. 67–8; K. N. Sukul, *Varanasi Down the Ages* (Patna, 1974), pp. 281–2.

<sup>9</sup> L/P&J/7/132, 'Communal Disorders'.

<sup>10</sup> Rev. M. A. Sherring, *Benares, The Sacred City of the Hindus* (1868, reprinted Delhi, 1975), p. 342, makes this equation explicitly: 'the history of Benares . . . is, to a great extent, the history of India'; see p. 152, below:

contiguous to pre-colonial times. This is a point to which we shall return.

Let us first examine how the Hindu-Muslim strife of 1809, that significant 'fragment' of the history of India, was reconstructed in some of the earliest accounts of the Banaras riots of 1809. One can construct an interesting table by putting together the information regarding some of the basic features of the 1809 riots as these are presented in the contemporary reports of colonial officials and the major published accounts up to the *Gazetteer* of 1907 (see Table 2). Plainly, there is not a great deal of agreement here even about the bare 'facts' of the incident, although every one of these accounts (barring the first, which is in a special category) was authenticated by the claim that it was based on the original government records or information supplied by officials who were in Banaras at the time. Heber notes that he obtained his information from the acting magistrate, W. W. Bird himself, who gave Heber 'a far more formidable idea of the tumult than I had previously formed.'<sup>11</sup> Mill's *History* refers to his use of 'personal information and ms. records'.<sup>12</sup> William Buyers' description of the 'War of the Lat', as he calls it, is based largely on Heber's account which, he writes, 'is *no doubt* more authentic than the common native reports of it . . . as he had the *facts* from Mr Bird, and other gentlemen, who were at that time in office at Benares, and had, themselves, the difficult task of quelling the tumult'.<sup>13</sup>

However, the purpose of the comparisons presented in Table 2 is not simply to point out the discrepancies existing in the earliest and most 'authoritative' accounts of the 1809 outbreak, although these are striking enough. It is to suggest that even the 'bare facts' of the situation were *constructed*—and constructed out of the prejudices, biases and 'common sense' of the writers.

What were the principal features of this construction? I shall try, first, to trace the steps whereby differences on major points of fact may have crept into the colonial accounts of the Banaras events of 1809. How did the *figures* of 28 or 29 people killed and 70 wounded, which Mill put at about 20 Muslims killed and 70

<sup>11</sup> R. Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India, from Calcutta to Bombay, 1824–25*, vol. I (London, 1828), p. 323.

<sup>12</sup> J. Mill (and H. H. Wilson), *The History of British India* (in ten volumes), vol. VII (London, 1858), p. 335.

<sup>13</sup> W. Buyers, *Recollections of Northern India* (London, 1848), p. 273 (emphasis added).

**TABLE 2: Some 'Facts' Regarding the Hindu-Muslim Conflict in Banaras, October 1809**

Source	Date of Outbreak	Site of the Initial Outbreak	Immediate Cause	Casualties	Role of Police & Military	Special Features of Protest
1 Ms. Colonial Government records (1809–10)	20–24 October 1809	Lat Bhairava	Pollution of Lat Bhairava following dispute over attempted conversion of a Hanuman shrine at the site from mud into stone	28–29 killed; 70 wounded	Connivance and 'highly criminal' conduct of police; military alone preserves order	Brahmans and 'superior orders' of the Hindus fast at riverside from evening 20 October. Persuaded to abandon fast on 23rd. 24th morning, Gosains assemble in protest at Ghats
2 Heber (1824) ?		Lat Bhairava	Breaking down of the Lat		Temper of the sepoys was 'extremely doubtful' but they held true	Fasting at the riverside by all the Brahmins in the city, 'amounting to many thousands' for 2–3 days after the 'tumult' was quelled
3 Prinsep (1825–30)	1805	Lat Bhairava	Frenzy excited by Muharram lamentations	—	—	—
4 Mill (1845)	21–23 October 1809	Lat Bhairava and Imambarah in close proximity to it	Altercation between Hindu and Muslim worshippers, leading to injury to the Imambarah and	Aboor 20 Muslims killed, 70 people wounded	'The Sipahis, although of both persuasions, discharged their duties with perfect impartiality and military steadiness: the	'The Brahmins and principal inhabitants' fasted at the riverside 'night and day, during the continuance of the

	<b>demolition of a makeshift Hanuman temple in same precinct</b>	police, equally mixed, had early taken part in the conflict according to their respective creeds.'	'disorder'; persuaded with some difficulty to abandon this on 23 October.
<b>5 Buyers (1848)</b>	—	? Lat Bhairava	Clash between Holi 'procession' of Hindus and Muhamarram procession of Muslims
		—	'Difficult . . . to trust the native soldiers; but, they did their duty well'
			'all the Brahmins in the city, many thousands in number', fasted for 2–3 days.
<b>6 Gazetteer (1907)</b>	October 1809	Aurangzeb mosque on the site of the old Vishwanath temple	Friction over the mosque leads to a 'sudden' outbreak
		Several hundred killed	Nothing worthy of special note during the 'riots'. But a curious sequel was a feud between the military and the police, which 'originated, no doubt, in religious differences'

Sources: India Office Library and Records, London, Bengal Criminal Judicial Proceedings for 1809 and 1810; R. Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India, from Calcutta to Bombay, 1824–25*, vol. I (London, 1828); J. Prinsep, *Benares Illustrated (3 series of drawings)* (London, 1831, 1832, 1834); J. Mill (and H. H. Wilson), *The History of British India* (in ten volumes), vol. vii (London, 1858); W. Buyers, *Recollections of Northern India* (London, 1848); H. R. Nevill, *Benares: A Gazetteer, Being Vol. xxvi of the District Gazeteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh* (Lucknow, 1922; Preface dated December 1907). Among other major colonial writings of the period, the Rev. M.A. Sherring, *Benares, the Sacred City of the Hindus* (1868; reprinted Delhi, 1975) and E. B. Havell, *Benares: The Sacred City* (London, 1905) agree in almost every particular with Buyers' account of 1848.

wounded, get inflated so dramatically in the *Gazetteer* of 1907 and the government memorandum of 1928 to 'several hundred' killed?<sup>14</sup> How did the *site* of the initial outbreak shift from the Lat Bhairava, in the open area a mile outside the limits of the city, to the Bisheswar (or Vishwanath) temple in the very heart of it? What accounts for the displacement of the '*cause*' of the conflict from the pollution and breaking down of the Lat Bhairava, to the 'frenzy' excited by Muharram lamentations, to a clash between Holi and Muharram processions, to 'friction' over the mosque built by Aurangzeb at the Gyanvapi (the site of the Vishwanath temple)? Second, I shall argue that the reconstruction of the Banaras riots in colonialist discourse, in its successive recensions spread over a hundred years or so, amounts to the making of a narrative form of strategic importance 'for the analysis of Indian politics. This is a form of representation of communal riots which assumes, over time, the importance of a master narrative and acts as a sort of model for all descriptions, and hence evaluations, of communal riots in official (and, I might add, nationalist) prose. In the colonial case this communal riot narrative is simultaneously and necessarily a statement on the Indian 'past'.

### III

In order to examine the basic features of this narrative we may analyse colonial accounts of the 1809 Banaras riots under three broad headings: (1) the question of 'origins' or 'causes'; (2) the identification of rival crowds and the description of collective actions; (3) the reduction of these actions to a law-and-order problem, a part of the history of colonial administration.

The concern with origins is evident from some of the earliest reports of the Banaras riots. This is how the matter is dealt with in a detailed letter written by the local magistrate, W. W. Bird, to the government less than a week after the suppression of the violence. At the site of the Lat Bhairava where, according to this report, a mosque and Imambarah had been erected in the days of Aurangzeb, there was also a mud construction which housed an image of Hanuman.<sup>15</sup> A Nagar Brahman tried to convert this shrine into one

<sup>14</sup> Mill apparently took note only of the casualties reported during the worst phase of the violence, on 22 October 1809.

<sup>15</sup> Other reports speak of a mosque that extended into an Idgah, and that is what exists at the site today.

of stone in fulfilment of a vow. This was resisted by Muslim weavers who worshipped there, on the grounds that the stone construction would be an encroachment on 'the *masjid* which surrounds the Laut'. The Hindus and Muslims involved in the dispute agreed to wait until after the Dasehra holidays, which ended on 19 October 1809, and to then refer the matter to the court. However, on the evening of 20 October, 'the Joolahirs [Julahas, Muslim weavers], instead of referring, assembled suddenly at the Laut to decide their differences in person' and committed 'those indignities' (i.e. the pollution of the Lat Bhairava) that led to the riots of 21 October.

Early on the morning of the 21st, the report goes on to say, large numbers of Hindus 'of all cast[e]s, especially Nagirs, Goshaiens, and Rajepoots' gathered and, after some hesitation, did some damage to the Imambarah that stood adjacent to the Lat. Upon this, Muslim weavers from the vicinity marched to the Lat and upset some of the images erected round about it. Tempers rose and the local police, both Hindus and Muslims, 'partook of the infection'. The Kotwal, a Muslim, succeeded through his personal exertions, in holding off both the Muslim and the Hindu party for a while. However, 'at length the Joolahirs collecting in considerable numbers armed with swords and clubs, hoisted a standard, and exclaiming Imam Hoosein and beating their breasts, marched towards the city.' They were reported to be heading for the Bisheshwar or Vishwanath temple, 'the principal place of Hindoo worship in the city'. But they were defeated on the way in a battle at Gai Ghat where a very large crowd of Hindus had assembled: here two or three Muslim Julahas were killed or wounded. Upon this, the assembled Julahas 'with great precipitation' retraced their steps and threw down and broke the Lat Bhairava. 'The effects of this outrage on the minds of the Hindus will be readily conceived.'<sup>16</sup>

This account, which we need pursue no further for the moment, perhaps provides a few clues as to where the later colonial writers got their ideas about the origins of the 1809 outbreak. Heber's view that the breaking down of the Lat was the immediate provocation for the riots comes naturally enough, for this was perhaps the moment of maximum fissility, when things might have gone in any direction. After this, what was a fairly localized clash became a

<sup>16</sup> (IOL), Board's Collections, vol. 365 (F/4/365), no. 9093, W. W. Bird, acting magistrate, Benares, to Dowdeswell, secretary to the government, judicial department, 30 October 1809 (consultn. no. 23 of 5 December 1809).

general fight over large parts of the city, and this moment may well have stood out in Bird's recollections when he talked to Heber fifteen years after these events.

Prinsep seems to have been the originator of the view that Muslim lamentations at the Muharram were responsible for the tension that led to the outbreak (see Table 2). It is possible that he obtained this idea from the report that, on 21 October 1809, a large body of Julahs marched towards the Vishwanath temple 'armed with swords and clubs, (carrying) a standard . . . exclaiming Iman Hoosein and beating their breasts'.<sup>17</sup>

'Muharram' refers to the ten-day period of mourning in the eponymous first month of the Muslim year which Muslims, especially Shias, observe in memory of the martyrs Imam Hasan and Imam Husain, who lost their lives in battle at the Karbala. While orthodox Sunnis are supposed to take no part in this ritual, in the past Muslims of all persuasions, and indeed large numbers of Hindus too, in villages and small towns all over India, joined in the processions of *tazias* (replicas of the graves of the martyrs) and participated in the recitations of the story of their sacrifice. This public statement of community grief reaches its height on the last two or three days of the mourning period, when the processions become larger, the competition between different groups (each presenting their own laments and recitations) sharper, and the exhibition of sorrow takes on an extreme physical dimension. 'One of the most impressive religious spectacles in India', Crooke wrote in the 1890s, 'is . . . the long procession of Tazias and flags which streams along the streets, with a vast crowd of mourners, who scream out their lamentations and beat their breasts till the blood flows, or . . . sink fainting in an ecstasy of sorrow'.<sup>18</sup>

Prinsep described these same proceedings from what he had seen of the 'Procession of the Tazeeas' in Banaras in the late 1820s. For ten days in Muharram, Muslims clad in green and black, 'their trappings of woe', commemorate the martyrdom of Hasan and Husain, he observed. 'The piteous tale is chaunted in the current language by people hired, apparently, for their strength of lungs, who work themselves and their audience by degrees into a phrenzy of grief; tearing their hair, beating their breasts, and crying 'Hoosyn,

<sup>17</sup> Loc.cit, para. 4

<sup>18</sup> W. Crooke, *The North-Western Provinces of India* (1897; Karachi, 1972), pp. 263–4.

Hoosyn', until quite exhausted'.<sup>19</sup> This was not unlike the Banaras magistrate's description of the Julahas' march towards the Vishwanath temple on 21 October 1809, 'armed with swords and clubs, [carrying] a standard . . . exclaiming Imam Hoosein and beating their breasts'. It was perhaps this superficial resemblance that led Prinsep to conclude: 'It was under such a state of excited zeal [owing to Muharram lamentations] that a congregation at the Lat'h Imambareh, in 1805 [sic], was urged by some fanatic preacher to overthrow and defile the pillar and images of Hindoo worship at that place'.<sup>20</sup> In any event, we have no other evidence of a Muharram procession having been taken out at this time. A 'Muharram' procession, in any case, there could not have been, for Muharram on this occasion happened to come three and a half months later, in early February 1810.

Here, in Prinsep's hands, 'Muharram' becomes a metaphor for the representation of the Other. This public exhibition of grief, like its obverse the carnivalesque celebration of joy, is the kind of dramatized and ritualized behaviour that stands for the primitive—once found in the West, still widespread in the Orient. It is that aspect of Oriental life that is furthest removed from the restrained, privatized, 'civilized' life of modern Europe. It is volatile as well: insurgency and violence lurk just beneath the surface here; it is all too easy for the primitive to get out of control. As Crooke put it,

One of the most difficult duties of the Indian Magistrate is to regulate these [Muharram] processions and decide the precedence of its members. The air rings with the cries of these ardent fanatics, and their zeal often urges them to violence directed against Hindus or rival sectaries. But the English Gallio is no judge of such matters, and his anxieties do not end until he has steered without conflict or disturbance the howling crowd of devotees through the stifling city lanes into the open fields beyond, where the mimic sepulchres of the martyrs are supposed to be flung into a tank or buried.<sup>21</sup>

Or the Rev. C. P. Cape:

The annual celebration of the death of Husain undoubtedly helps in some Indian cities to accentuate the differences between the Shias and the Sunnis; and the Deputy Commissioner congratulates himself [again

<sup>19</sup> J. Prinsep, *Banares Illustrated* (3 series of drawings) (London, 1831, 1832, 1834), note on 'Procession of the Tazeeas'.

<sup>20</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>21</sup> Crooke, *The North-Western Provinces*, p. 264.

the singular form, testimony to the universality of the statement] if Muharram has passed off peacefully. In Bombay, British artillery and infantry have been requisitioned [when? every year?] to keep the excited crowds in order and to patrol the streets at night . . . When this festival occurs at the same time as the Holi, the authorities in certain towns know that, unless great care is taken, there may be serious disturbance.<sup>22</sup>

Thus: Muharram (Muharram/Holi) → Excitement → Violence. Since these are the steps, an outbreak of violence such as that in Banaras in 1809, makes the colonial observer look for 'Muharram' as the 'cause'—and find it! Prinsep finds 'Muharram' in his search for the origins of the riot, Mill and Buyers find the compound 'Holi-and-Muharram'.

A similar metaphorical function is performed by the religious sites of the Hindus and Muslims. All the nineteenth-century accounts of the Banaras events of 1809 point to the significance of such sites and the 'irrational' attachment of the 'natives' to them (as to idols, cows, rivers, trees, what have you). Heber's account of the *dharna* that followed, or in some versions accompanied, the riots of October 1809, provides adequate illustration:

The holy city had been profaned; the blood of a cow had been mixed with the purest water of Gunga, and salvation was to be obtained at Benares no longer. All the brahmins in the city, amounting to many thousands, went down in melancholy procession, with ashes on their heads, naked and fasting, to the principal ghats leading to the river, and sate there with their hands folded, their heads hanging down, to all appearance inconsolable, and refusing to enter a house or to taste food . . .<sup>23</sup>

In the same way, colonial accounts dwell on the double sanctity, to Hindus and to Muslims, of the sites over which the disputes of October 1809 are supposed to have arisen. The Kapal Mochan ground, where the Lat Bhairava stood, was one of several places in the city where buildings sacred to the Hindus and the Muslims respectively stood adjacent to one another. Aurangzeb, they tell us, had ordered the demolition of a number of temples and the construction of mosques 'with the same materials and upon the same

<sup>22</sup> Rev. C. P. Cape, *Benares. The Stronghold of Hinduism* (London, n.d.), pp. 109–10. Cf. J. Masselos, 'Change and Custom in the Format of the Bombay Mohurram during the 19th and 20th centuries', *South Asia*, new series, v. 2 (Dec. 1982), who notes (p. 48) that nineteenth-century colonialist observers looked at Muharram as 'a grand spectacle of religious passion'.

<sup>23</sup> Heber, *Narrative*, Vol. I, p. 325.

foundations', in Prinsep's words, 'leaving portions of the ancient walls exposed here and there as evidences of the indignity to which the Hindoo religion had been subjected'.<sup>24</sup>

Among these constructions, perhaps the most widely talked about was the Gyanvapi mosque built under Aurangzeb's instructions at the site of the old Vishwanath temple. Colonial observers in the nineteenth century were agreed that this spot was 'the chief source of friction' between the Hindus and Muslims of the city; 'a constant source of heart-burnings and feuds both to Hindus and Mohammedans'; 'a monument of Moslem pride and intolerance and of Hindu humiliation in former times'.<sup>25</sup> The extraordinary sanctity accorded to the Vishwanath temple was testified to by the interesting observation in the magistrate's report of 21 November 1809 that the rumour of an intended Muslim attack on the Vishwanath 'was at first not credited. It was too extravagant for belief'.<sup>26</sup>

It is this history of the destruction of temples and the construction of mosques in their vicinity at several places in Banaras, the resulting bitterness and friction, and the special sanctity attached by the Hindus to the principal temple of Vishwanath, that probably helps to explain both the shifting of the initial site of the 1809 outbreak in some of the later colonial writings and the *Gazeteer*'s exceptional account of its proximate cause. Mill, who obliquely suggested some link between the violence of October 1809 and the coincidence of the 'moveable feasts' of the Hindus and Muslims, went on further to write of friction at the sites where Muslim religious buildings had been erected near old temples as the context for the conflict in 1809.<sup>27</sup> To put it in other words, if there were several sources of discord, there was every reason to believe that several of them contributed to the making of such a major conflict as this one.

The Rev. C. P. Cape, a less careful historian than Mill, referred to the clash of the Muharram and Holi 'festivals', and then proceeded to write with such vagueness about the site of the outbreak that it becomes impossible to tell the exact location of even the buildings he specifically names; indeed it becomes clear that in his reckoning one place was as good as any other as an excuse for the violence. The

<sup>24</sup> Prinsep, *Banaras Illustrated*, p. 11 of chapter entitled 'Banaras 1830'.

<sup>25</sup> *Banaras Gazetteer*, p. 207; Sherring, *Banaras, The Sacred City*, p. 52; Buyers, *Recollections*, p. 256, respectively.

<sup>26</sup> F/4/365, E. Watson, magistrate, to government, 21 November 1809.

<sup>27</sup> Mill, *History*, Vol. VII, pp. 336-7.

Muslims were defeated in 'some street fighting' that broke out owing to the alleged clash of Holi and Muharram processions, Cape wrote. They then 'revenged themselves by retreating into a courtyard of Aurangzeb's mosque and broke down the Lat of Shiva, which the Hindus held in high esteem. The Hindus pulled down a mosque, and then the military intervened'.<sup>28</sup>

There is no way of knowing from this account whether 'Aurangzeb's mosque' refers to the mosque built adjacent to the Lat Bhairav (which no one referred to by this name), or whether Cape believed that the Lat was in fact located in the great mosque built at the Madhavrai ghat with its minarets towering over the city (which is still called the Alamgiri masjid), or in the Gyanvapi mosque built by Aurangzeb at the site of the Vishwanath temple (which was in fact the mosque attacked and partly demolished by Hindu rioters on 22 October, after the felling of the Lat Bhairav on the day before). But the point is that for Cape's purposes it really does not matter. Processions clash: street-fighting follows: the defeated party retreats and despoils a sacred structure: the other party pulls down a mosque: the military intervenes. This is the structure of a tale. Evil clashes with evil. Good intervenes. Order is restored.

It is not very difficult to see, in this light, why the compiler of the Banaras *District Gazetteer*, writing around the same time as Cape, and more directly concerned to make a general statement regarding the benefits of British rule, should suppose that the worst instance of Hindu–Muslim strife in Banaras in the nineteenth century must have originated at the site of their most obvious quarrel, i.e. the spot where the Vishwanath temple and the Gyanvapi masjid stood cheek by jowl; or again why he should assume that such an instance of fighting over such a sensitive spot amongst such a fanatical people must inevitably have claimed 'several hundreds' of lives.<sup>29</sup>

What the colonial accounts sought to do was to give the violence of 1809 a cause and the cause a name (fanaticism, irrationality), thus

<sup>28</sup> Cape, *Benares. The Stronghold*, p. 110.

<sup>29</sup> Since then this colonial account, considerably amplified, has been widely accepted. K. N. Shukul, *Varanasi Down the Ages*, p. 281, speaks of major riots both in 1805 and 1809, accepting the dates given in both Prinsep and the *Benares Gazetteer*; Diana Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (London, 1983), p. 197, attributes the 1809 riots to the attempted construction of a shrine between the Gyanvapi mosque and the Viswanath temple, the clash of the Holi and Muharram festivals and the destruction of the Lat Bhairav.

emptying it of all other significance, including, as we shall see, its dangers for the colonial state. For the real point of the exercise was a deeper one: it was to describe the 'native' character, establish the perverse nature of the population, and the fundamental antagonism between 'Hindus' and 'Muslims'. This may be inferred from a glance at certain other features that recur over and over again in colonial writings on the Banaras events of the early nineteenth century: the emphasis on ethnic and doctrinal signs for the identification of rival crowds; the construction of a diachrony into which these events fitted; and the description of violence as a means of describing native character, so that Nature stands in for Culture.

#### IV

The colonial obsession with ethnic and doctrinal signs for the identification of rival crowds is perhaps best illustrated by the *Banaras Gazetteer*'s remarks on the military-police feud that followed the riots of 1809. We have already noted the *Gazetteer*'s contention that this feud 'originated, no doubt, in religious differences'. There is nothing, however, in the original correspondence of the magistrate, the military commanders and other people in Banaras at the time, to suggest even remotely that the clashes between military and police personnel in 1810 had anything to do with religious matters.

If there was a connection with October 1809, it was that the behaviour of the police at that time had rendered the name of the police, in Bird's words, 'generally obnoxious, but particularly to the Sepoys, whose meritorious conduct entitled them in a manner to feel contempt for the cowardice of the police'.<sup>30</sup> When the military guard was finally withdrawn in 1809 and the police restored to their normal functions in Banaras, sepoys going into the city reportedly poked fun at the police. Some of them also persistently defied a magisterial order against the carrying of arms in the streets of Banaras. The incidence of disputes between military and police personnel on account of these pinpricks increased in August and September 1810. As the season of *melas* associated with the Dasehra celebrations approached, the civil authorities were understandably

<sup>30</sup> (IOL) Bengal Criminal Judl. Prog., Range 130, vol. 22, Bird to Dowdeswell, 13 October 1810 (consultation no. 46 of 24 October 1810). The rest of this paragraph is based on the same consultation.

perturbed about the possible consequences of such quarrels between the two arms of the law and the state, and they urged their military counterparts to ensure strict discipline. The approach of an important religious festival and the apprehensions aroused by it was the extent of the 'religious' dimension to this feud, which degenerated in the course of time, as the *District Gazetteer* has it, into 'a long succession of affrays . . . with Hindus and Muslims indiscriminately mingled on either side.' The failure of the indigenous population to conform to the colonial stereotype of Hindu and Muslim crowd (or for that matter, individual) behaviour meant that it could only be 'indiscriminate'.

Such compulsive thinking in stereotypes is evident also in the earliest colonial writings on the events of 1809–11, as we can see from contemporary official reports of the great anti-house tax *harial* of December 1810–January 1811. This extraordinary act of protest was described as follows in a letter from the Banaras magistrate, dated 28 December 1810:

An oath was administered throughout the city both among the Hindus and the Mohammedans, enjoining all classes to neglect their respective occupations [until the tax was withdrawn] . . . The Lohars, the Mistrees, the Jolahirs, the Hujams, the Durzees, the Kohars, the Bearers, every class of workmen engaged unanimously in this conspiracy . . . during the 26th, the dead bodies were actually cast neglected into the Ganges because the proper people could not be prevailed upon to administer the customary Rites.<sup>31</sup>

To which Mill added, colourfully: 'the very thieves refrained from the exercise of their vocation although the shops and houses were left without protection—the people deserting the city in a body.'<sup>32</sup>

In trying to make sense of this staggering popular protest, the officials turned to their experience of 1809 and their 'common sense' about the dynamics of the local society. 'Men of all classes and description, from the highest to the lowest, whether Mohammedans or Hindoos, Jolahirs, Raujpoots and Goshains included, were all of one mind, and engaged by oath to promote the common cause',

<sup>31</sup> Board's Collections, vol. 323 (F/4/323), no. 7407, Bird to Dowdeswell, 28 December 1810. Many of the letters and documents from this volume that are referred to here are also reprinted in Dharampal, *Civil Disobedience & Indian Tradition: With Some Early Nineteenth Century Documents* (Varanasi, 1917).

<sup>32</sup> Mill, *History*, Vol. VII, p. 334.

Bird wrote in January 1811.<sup>33</sup> The echoes of 1809 are clear. Then, Brahmans, Rajputs and Gosains were seen as being the most active elements on the Hindu side, Julahas on the Muslim side. Now, those who have risen are described as 'Muhammedans (and) Hindoos, Jolahirs, Raujpoots and Goshains included.' Following the same logic, the commander of the troops stationed at Banaras expressed the fear that the Rajputs, Gosains, 'Muslims' and other 'fighting castes' (*sic*) might take up arms, especially if the blood of Brahmans or other 'religious orders' was spilt.<sup>34</sup> The magistrate spoke of how the 'religious orders' had exerted their full influence in favour of the agitation and 'men of rank and respectability' encouraged the huge crowds;<sup>35</sup> and Heber later wrote of *dharmpatris* issued by 'the leading Brahmins' as being central to the process of mobilizing the people.<sup>36</sup>

In all this, the colonial observers neglected the evidence that they<sup>\*</sup> had before them of the very different sections of local society that formed the vanguard of the rising in 1810–11, as compared to 1809. The Rajputs, who are described as the 'moving spirits' behind the Hindu actions in 1809, hung back in 1810–11;<sup>37</sup> indeed, on the latter occasion, many Rajput landowners assisted the colonial authorities in their attempts to disperse the crowds.<sup>38</sup> And while many of the 'leading native inhabitants' and 'religious orders' of Banaras were certainly involved in the anti-house-tax agitation, they appear to have conceded the leadership, at least in the earlier stages of the protest to artisans, skilled workers and other sections of the lower classes.

I have quoted earlier the first detailed report regarding the crowds that had assembled, which listed the Lohars, Mistris, Julahas, Hajjams, Darzis, Kohars and Kahars as the 'seven classes of people' who, '*attended by multitudes of others* of all ranks and descriptions', gathered in the vicinity of the city.<sup>39</sup> The Lohars, in particu-

<sup>33</sup> F/4/323, no. 7407, note on verbal communication made by Bird to Macdonald at conference held at Mr Brooke's house on 13 January 1811.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, Macdonald to Bird, 12 January 1811, and note on conference held at Mr Brooke's house on 18 January 1811.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, Bird to Dowdeswell, 4 January, 8 January and 28 January 1811.

<sup>36</sup> Heber, *Narrative Vol. I*, p. 327.

<sup>37</sup> *Benares Gazetteer*, p. 207.

<sup>38</sup> F/4/323, no. 7407, Bird to Dowdeswell, 8 January 1811, and Dowdeswell to Bird, 11 January 1811.

<sup>39</sup> See note 30.

lar, were singled out as prime movers of the uprising. 'The Lohars, who originally assembled for another purpose, soon took a principal part in the conspiracy, and have collected here in great numbers from all parts of the [Banaras] province', Bird reported on 2 January 1911.<sup>40</sup>

W. O. Salmon, the collector, confirmed this in a communication to the government on the same day:

If one party be more obstinate and more determined upon extending the mischief than another, the Lohars, or blacksmiths, may be so charged, for they were not only the first to convoke the assembly of their near brethren, but they have far and wide called upon other Lohars to join them with the intent that no implement of cultivation or of harvest (which is fast approaching) be either made or mended, and thus that the zeminders and ryots may be induced to take part with the malcontents, in short that the whole of the country shall directly or indirectly be urged to insist on the repeal of the tax. *With these Lohars almost all other cast[es], sects and persuasions are in League*, and I am informed under a most binding oath amongst each other.<sup>41</sup>

Many of the most familiar features of Orientalist knowledge are already in evidence here: the type-casting ('fighting castes' like 'Rajputs', 'Gosains', 'Muslims'!), the centrality assigned to the 'religious orders', the charge of manipulation by elite groups or 'leading native inhabitants'. This reductionist tendency naturally influenced colonial descriptions of crowd actions as well. Consider once more Cape's matter-of-fact statement on the 1809 riots: Holi and Muharram clash. There is 'some street fighting'. The defeated 'Muhammadans' revenge themselves by retreating into 'Aurangzeb's mosque' and breaking down the Lat Bhairava. 'The Hindus' pull down a mosque. And then the military intervenes. The message is transparent: *this* is the Hindu and Muslim character, Hindus and Muslims cannot help their actions.

It is the same understanding that guides the Banaras *Gazetteer*'s, and thence the Government of India's 1928 remarks on what followed the breaking down of the Lat Bhairav in Banaras in October 1809: 'Great crowds of Hindus attacked the mosque of Aurangzeb, set it on fire and put to death every Muhammadan of the neighbourhood who fell into their hands. The entire city was given up to pil-

<sup>40</sup> F/4/323, no. 7407, Bird to Dowdeswell, 2 January 1811.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, Salmon to Secretary, Government of India, revenue department, 2 January 1811 (emphasis added).

lage and slaughter; and order was not restored by the troops until some fifty mosques had been destroyed and several hundred persons had lost their lives.<sup>42</sup> Another expression of the same essentializing process is found in the colonial writers' historicization of the Banaras events of 1809. Given the nature of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims', 'Hinduism' and 'Islam', a violent conflict between the two was always on the cards. The riots of 1809 are represented as part of a continuum, a tradition: 'one of those convulsions which had frequently occurred in the past owing to the religious antagonism of the Hindu and Moslem sections of the population.' Or as Francis Younghusband put it in a book entitled *Dawn in India*, published in 1930, 'the animosities of centuries are always smouldering beneath the surface'.<sup>43</sup>

Judging by the colonial accounts of the strife in Banaras, 1809 sees only a development in degree, an intensification. 'Towards the close of 1809 an open rupture could no longer be delayed' (Mill). 'The ill-will between the rival religions [sic] culminated in a sudden outbreak of great intensity in October 1809' (Nevill).<sup>44</sup> In certain instances, the tradition of conflict is seen as growing out of an actual historical experience: in the Banaras case, Aurangzeb's iconoclasm. Thus in a *Handbook* on Banaras published in 1886, the Rev. J. Ewen notes that the Lat Bhairav stands on a site appropriated for Muslim worship in Aurangzeb's time but continuing to be used by Hindu worshippers as well. He then simply adds: 'The dispute between the parties reached a climax at the end of the last century [sic].'<sup>45</sup>

An 'ill-will' that exists from the mid seventeenth century, if not earlier, 'culminates' for no obvious reason, 'reaches a climax' in a 'sudden' outbreak of rioting in 1809. In this kind of history, 'violence' always belonged to a pre-colonial tradition: the imposition of British rule, the displacement of an earlier balance of power, and the raising of new hopes and fears had nothing to do with it. This 'tradition' of strife becomes, indeed, the justification for colonial rule. By the later nineteenth century, it is no longer the power of the English sword, nor simply the superiority of English science and commerce, but also the argument that the 'natives' are hopelessly divided, given to primitive passions and incapable of managing their own affairs, that legitimizes British

<sup>42</sup> L/P&J/7/132, 'Communal Disorders'.

<sup>43</sup> F. Younghusband, *Dawn in India* (London, 1930), p. 144.

<sup>44</sup> Mill, *History*, Vol. VII, p. 336; Nevill, *Benares Gazetteer*, p. 207.

<sup>45</sup> J. Ewen, *Benares: A Handbook for Visitors* (Calcutta, 1886), p. 40.

power.<sup>46</sup> Hence the Rev. James Kennedy, after his sojourn in northern India in the 1870s and 1880s: 'The antagonism [between Hindu and Muslim 'systems'], though generally latent, every now and then breaks out into fierce strife, which but for the interposition of Government would lead to civil war.'<sup>47</sup>

## V

I have left to the last what is possibly the most striking feature of the colonial writings under discussion and also perhaps the least investigated, in part because it has passed without great change into nationalist writings and a good deal of recent historiography. This is the reduction of Indian history to the history of the state. In colonialist writings a distinction was first made between the history of local society—wild, chaotic, liable to unexpected explosions—and the history of the state. The impressive efforts at state building in the past were noted, and the early British rulers of India self-consciously modelled themselves on their claimed 'predecessors', the Mughal emperors, and, to some extent, different Hindu ruling dynasties in southern India. But above all in these writings, it was the new, colonial state that stood out in contrast to the primitive, pre-political, one might even say proto-historic, character of the local society.

The Rev. M. A. Sherring put the case unambiguously in 1868 with reference to the history of Banaras which was, in his view, 'to a great extent the history of India'. 'While its career has been of long duration', he wrote, 'it has not been of a character to awaken much enthusiasm or admiration. It cannot be said that either the moral, or the social, or even the intellectual, condition of the people residing here is a whit better than it was upwards of two thousand years ago . . .'. In other words, they *had* no history. But: 'while I look with profound regret on much of the past history of India, I look forward to its coming history with strong hope and confidence'.<sup>48</sup>

The *Gazetteer* of 1907 also set off this 'past' history of Banaras against what Sherring called its 'coming' history. 'The history of Be-

<sup>46</sup> This line of argument is, of course, already put forward for the annexation of Awadh and in other such cases even earlier.

<sup>47</sup> J. Kennedy, *Life and Work in Benares and Kumaon, 1839–1877* (London 1884), p. 335.

<sup>48</sup> Sherring, *Banares*, pp. 342–4.

nares during the first part of the nineteenth century is mainly a record of administrative development under British rule. The only disturbance of the public peace occurred in 1809 . . . [etc.]'. James Mill made the same point much earlier, when he wrote that the maintenance of peace and order in that city was 'for some time' a 'troublesome' and 'imperfectly' accomplished task. But the 'unrelaxing firmness' of British rule, a 'better knowledge of the British character' and the 'improving intelligence' of the Indians 'lightened the labour'—presumably the divinely ordained British task of bringing 'law and order' to these domains—so that ten years after 1809 'Benares was regulated with as much facility as any other city in the territories of the Company.'<sup>49</sup> The altered speed of time here is striking. The 'pre-history' of Banaras, like the history of all of India before the coming of the British power, is chaos. And then, within ten years, 'history' supervenes, order is established.

The representation of all popular politics as a problem of law and order, and their assimilation thereby to the history of the state, is a commonly observed feature of colonialist writings on India. In Banaras in 1809 the origins of Hindu-Muslim strife were seen as lying not only in the peculiar religious sensibilities of the people but also in an 'unwarranted' act of assembly on the part of the Muslim weavers. The dispute over the consolidation of a Hanuman shrine at the Kapal Mochan was apparently followed by an agreement between local Hindu and Muslim leaders to wait until the Dasehra holidays ended on 19 October 1809, and then refer the matter to the court. However, on the evening of 20 October, the magistrate's report tells us, 'the Joola-hirs, *instead of referring, assembled* suddenly at the Laut to decide their differences in person' and took those actions that led to riots on the following day.<sup>50</sup>

Nine months later, while discussing measures that might be adopted to prevent a recurrence of such disturbances, the magistrate wrote to the government: 'The disturbance [of October 1809] is found to have originated in the abuse of that privilege which the Natives have been permitted to enjoy, of *assembling among themselves to deliberate on questions of common interest*. I found it expedient to prohibit all assemblies of this nature without previous application to the police . . .'.<sup>51</sup> So that along with its disarming of

<sup>49</sup> Mill, *History*, Vol. VII, pp. 338–9.

<sup>50</sup> F/4/365, Bird to Dowdeswell, 30 October 1809, para. 3 (emphasis added).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, Bird to Dowdeswell, 30 October 1809, para. 7 (emphasis added).

the population of Banaras in 1809, the colonial regime also at this very early stage imposed strict limitations on the right of assembly of the subject people.

A similar obsession with law and order is discernible in the colonialist accounts of the anti-tax agitation of 1810–11. We find a great deal of writing on the extraordinary caste solidarity, the diversity of castes involved and, as we have noticed, the ‘leadership’ of the religious orders and the use of religious injunctions, that went into the making of this remarkable dharna and hartal. Having established the ethnic identity and the religious motivation of the crowd to their own satisfaction, the officials then turned to their other major concern—the question of law and order. One official observed that ‘instead of appearing like a tumultuous and disorderly mob, the vast multitudes came forth in a state of perfect organization: each caste, trade and profession occupied a distinct spot of ground, and was regulated in all its acts by the orders of its own punchayet’.<sup>52</sup> But the dispersal of the assembly, representing an active assertion of people’s power, was nevertheless treated as a matter of the greatest urgency. The magistrate’s report of 20 January 1811 is couched in familiar terms: ‘It becomes every day an object of greater importance to disperse the people, and compel them to put an end to their *seditious and unwarrantable proceedings*’.<sup>53</sup>

The appropriation of all of this history to the history of the state proceeded by another means as well—by glossing over, underplaying, even omitting significant areas of the people’s, and even the state’s, experience and activities. Notice, for example, the Banaras *Gazetteer*’s silence over police inefficiency and the possibility of military disloyalty in 1809. The contrast in this respect with the earlier colonial writings is remarkable (see Table 2).<sup>54</sup> The immediate reports ‘from the front’ in 1809 and 1810 expressed serious concern over the collapse of the police force and the possible repercussions on the military. The police were pronounced guilty of a ‘most culp-

<sup>52</sup> *Selections of Papers from the Records of the East India House relative to Revenue, Police, Civil, and Criminal Justice under the Company’s Government in India*, vol. II (London, 1820), p. 89.

<sup>53</sup> F/4/323, Bird to Dowdeswell, 20 January 1811.

<sup>54</sup> See also Sir John Malcolm’s discussion of the ‘alarming’ nature of the opposition to the government in Banaras in ‘1812’, as in Dacca, Bareilly and other places a few years later, in his *Political History of India from 1784–1823 in Two Volumes* (London, 1826), vol. I, pp. 577–80.

able neglect of duty' and 'highly criminal conduct'; 'both Hindus and Mahomedans composing it . . . exerted themselves to inflame the passions' of their co-religionists.<sup>55</sup> The military sepoys luckily held firm: but there was considerable anxiety among civil and military officials in Banaras at the time as to which way the wind would blow.

For about twenty days in October and November 1809 the sepoys were not allowed time off to bathe, dress, or prepare their food. 'It was deemed advisable', wrote the magistrate, 'considering the delicate nature of the service they were engaged in, to prevent them as much as possible from communicating with the people. For this purpose they were provided with *mithai* [local sweetmeats] that they might be at all times within the control and observation of their officers.' On 21 November 1809, when a reinforcement of troops arrived from Danapur, the authorities withdrew a good many sepoys from the city, but it was still thought advisable to retain the entire contingent of European officers 'to prevent all intercourse between the Seapoys and the people'.<sup>56</sup>

It was as if all this had been completely forgotten by the end of the century. Nevill's *Gazetteer* of 1907 referred to the sepoys in passing as having restored 'order' in Banaras after some fifty mosques had been destroyed and several hundred people killed. Nevill did not so much as mention the police in his description of the events of 1809. There was not the faintest suggestion here that these forces could have done anything but obey orders, that they were—even in the earliest years of British rule—anything more than cogs in a well-oiled colonial machine that arrived fully assembled and functioned with perfect efficiency from the moment of its installation. ('The history of Benares during the first part of the nineteenth century is mainly a record of administrative development.')

Mill had of course admitted otherwise; the maintenance of peace and order in Banaras was 'for some time' a 'troublesome' and 'imperfectly' accomplished task. But the 'unrelaxing firmness' of British rule, a 'better knowledge of the British character' and the consequent improvement in the intelligence of the 'natives' had cured all that. Here Mill and Nevill occupy the same ground. Firm-

<sup>55</sup> F/4/365, Bird's letters of 6 and 11 November 1809.

<sup>56</sup> Bengal Criminal Judl. Progs, Range 130, vol. 19, Bird to Dowdeswell, 11 July 1810 (emphasis added); F/4/356, Macdonald's letter of 31 October 1809; and F/4/365, Watson to Government, 21 November 1809, para. 15.

ness, Character, Intelligence. These are the hallmarks of British rule; this is the history of the 'perfect' state that is the colonial regime in India. What the nineteenth-century colonial writings on Banaras seek to do, almost without exception, is to promote a picture of the colonial state as a wise and neutral power, ruling almost without a physical presence by the sheer force of its moral authority. By the end of the nineteenth century this is established with the aid of a few blind spots: the colonial regime pretends to have no allies, no local collaborators (Mill, by contrast, had mentioned the opportune intervention of the Maharaja of Banaras in 1810–11) and a minimal armed force.

These blind spots are of course nothing compared to those that came to mark the history of the colonized as told by the colonizers. One gets some idea of the extent of the distortion of their history from the omission of any meaningful reference to the dharna of 1810–11 from the *Gazetteer's* summary of the history of Banaras in the early nineteenth century. I have earlier quoted Heber's account of the 1809 dharna involving 'all the brahmins in the city, amounting to many thousands'. Other accounts report the participation of the 'superior orders', the 'principal inhabitants', the Gosains, and so on. According to Heber, Bird, who was 'one of the ambassadors [of peace]' on this occasion, recalled that 'the scene was very impressive and even aweful. The gaunt squalid figures of the devotees, their visible and apparently unaffected anguish and dismay, the screams and outcries of the women who surrounded them, and the great numbers thus assembled, altogether constituted a spectacle of woe such as few cities but Benares could supply'.<sup>57</sup>

In his account of the Banaras events of 1809 Heber devotes nearly as much space to this dharna as he does to the incidents of violence and rioting, and his account is followed closely by later colonial writers like Mill and Buyers, Sherring and Havell. Not so by the compiler of the *Gazetteer* of 1907, who does not mention the dharna at all. The *Gazetteer* is equally dismissive of the anti-house-tax agitation of 1810–11, during which (by Heber's account) Banaras witnessed a dharna 'exceeding', as 'spectacle', even the dharna of 1809.<sup>58</sup>

Heber is sufficiently moved by what he learns of the popular pro-

<sup>57</sup> Heber, *Narrative*, vol. I, p. 325.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 325–6.

test in 1810–11 to devote several pages of his journal to a discussion of the agitation against the house tax. He writes without reservation of the strength and unity of the rising. After elaborating what he understands of the traditional Indian practice of dharna, the Bishop notes: ‘Whether [or not] there is any example under their ancient princes of a considerable portion of the people taking this strange method of remonstrance against oppression [sic] . . . in this case it was done with great resolution, and surprising concert and unanimity’.<sup>59</sup> His comments on the apprehensions of the government also merit quotation:

The local government were exceedingly perplexed. There was the chance that very many of these strange beings would really perish, either from their obstinacy [in fasting], or the diseases which they would contract in their present situation. There was a probability that famine would ensue from the interruption of agricultural labours at the most critical time of the year. There was a certainty that the revenue would suffer very materially from this total cessation of all traffick. And it might even be apprehended that their despair, and the excitement occasioned by such a display of physical force would lead them to far stronger demonstrations of discontent than that of sitting dhurna.<sup>60</sup>

Even in this ‘sympathetic’ colonial account, however, it is the colonial regime that emerges as the hero of the tale. Of the two sides involved in this confrontation, one is made up of an emotional population—‘strange (obstinate) beings’ with ‘strange methods’—seething with ‘anguish’, ‘dismay’, ‘despair’, but ultimately passive. In comprehending protest as despair, Heber aligns the expression to existential and, at bottom, passive categories; for protest, unlike despair, is deliberate and constitutes a programme of action—Heber relates the event to ‘being’ rather than to social and political circumstances. In his account the dharna has the potential of leading to more dangerous protest; the dharna itself barely qualifies as an act of resistance.

The active part in this confrontation is performed by those who make up the other half of Heber’s history. The point is best made in the Bishop’s own words. The ‘wise and merciful’ conduct of the officials stationed in Banaras who refused to do anything to provoke the crowds into violence, and the ‘wisdom’ of the ‘Supreme Government’ in repealing the ‘obnoxious tax’—nothing said here

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 326.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 326–7.

about who imposed the tax and what made it 'obnoxious' in the first place—'ended [the] disturbance which, if it had been harshly or improperly managed, might have put all India in a flame'.<sup>61</sup>

In the less sympathetic colonial account contained in the *Banaras Gazetteer* of 1907 and carried into the reports of the Indian Statutory Commission and other authorities, the colonial regime becomes the exclusive subject of modern Indian history. The *Gazetteer* devotes precisely five lines to the anti-house-tax movement of 1810–11, less than one complete sentence: 'before peace had been restored fresh riots arose with the introduction of the house-tax under Regulation XV of 1810, and it was again found necessary to station troops throughout the city to repress the popular disorder till the withdrawal of the obnoxious measure in the ensuing year.'<sup>62</sup> The history of the state makes its entrance here almost bashfully. What we are presented with is a caricature of all that belongs to the history of the community which succeeds in assimilating the life of the community to the development of the colonial administration—'peace', 'law' and 'order'. The reduction of the history of society to the history of the state is complete.

Let us quickly re-read the *Gazetteer's* summary of the history of Banaras for the first half of the nineteenth century:

'The only disturbance of the public peace' occurred in 1809 and the following year. Notice '*and* the following year'. Does this refer to a conflict that lasted from 1809 well into 1810? Or, what is more likely in the circumstances, to a more extended state of being?

'A curious sequel' to the 1809 strife was a military-police feud that 'originated, no doubt, in religious differences, but these appear to have been dropped in the course of time and a long succession of affrays ensued, with Hindus and Muslims indiscriminately mingled on either side.' 'Curious' perhaps because Hindus and Muslims had got so confused about their identities as to mix with one another; but of course this made no difference whatsoever to the essential 'irrationality' of their feuds, nor to their form which could only be 'affrays', 'riots', 'convulsions'.

'The trouble subsided with a partial reorganization of the city police in October 1810; but before peace had been restored fresh riots arose . . .'. Surely a novel understanding of the term 'riots' and

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 328–9.

<sup>62</sup> *Benares Gazetteer*, p. 209.

how they occur or, rather, 'arise'! Nothing remains in the five-line entry on the 1810–11 events of the great crowds that gathered, the manner of their gathering, the remarkable mode of their protest, the consultation and decision-making, the perplexity and fears of the government and, one need scarcely add, the feelings of the people of Banaras when they were confronted with the new house-tax. The entry reverts, instead, to the theme of violence and disorder as the normal state of affairs and the consequent need for British intervention to establish peace and orderly behaviour. Here, all political action undertaken outside the domain of British administrative initiative is represented as a 'convulsion'. Politics before the era of English-style constitutions in India is banished to the domain of the irrational, indeed the pre-political—'spontaneous', un-'conscious', 'fanatical'. It is a tradition that historians are still struggling to relinquish.

'Nothing' occurred in Banaras after 1810–11 that was 'worthy of record' until the 'riots of 1852' (when some Nagar Brahmans organized protests against an alleged proposal to introduce common messing arrangements for prisoners in the jail, and clashes occurred with the police).<sup>63</sup>

Astonishingly, given the record of its ability to smell out a 'riot' in the most unlikely places, the *Gazetteer* has nothing to say about the events of 1891 in Banaras; perhaps the entry on the history of the city had already become too long. But Crooke, writing a general account of *The North-Western Provinces of India* in 1894, made up for this lacuna: 'Only three years ago, the weavers of Benares, always a turbulent, fanatical class, took advantage of a quarrel over an almost deserted Hindu shrine, with which they had no possible concern, to spread rapine and outrage through the city'.<sup>64</sup> Once again, this remark is made in the course of a discussion of Hindu–Muslim conflict, and it is worthwhile to note what some of the other surviving evidence from this period tells us about 1891.

The agitation in this instance appears to have begun with the opposition of several municipal councillors and other prominent Hindus of the city to the proposed demolition of all or part of a temple dedicated to Ram, in order to clear the ground for a water-pumping station. A temple protection committee was apparently set

<sup>63</sup> See (IOL) NWP, Criminal Judl. Progs, Range 223/vol.36, no. 1466 of August 1852.

<sup>64</sup> W. Crooke, *The North-Western Provinces of India*, p. 187.

up, the Sujan Samaj (Respectable People's Society) also took up the cause, 'thousands' of applications were sent to the collector, and numerous meetings held between November 1890 and April 1891 to protest against these plans.<sup>65</sup> There is some suggestion that this protest was connected, at the start, with the desire to ward off further taxation, and that it got mixed up in time with a more widespread fear about the threat to religious buildings, Hindu as well as Muslim, posed by the system of colonial rule.

That is one part of the story. Another is that the large community of Muslim weavers in Banaras was in exceptionally straitened circumstances in this period, owing to the fall in the demand for their rich fabrics and the prevalent high prices of all kinds of foodgrains. They had therefore approached the collector to ask for some relief. There is nothing in the official records to suggest a Hindu-Muslim clash over this or any other issue in Banaras at this particular juncture. On the contrary, the magistrate of the city spoke of the 1891 outbreak as the result of a 'league or covenant' between Muslims and Hindus for the future 'mutual protection' of their religious buildings, which might be threatened by the extension of waterworks and drainage schemes.

Even this suggestion of the magistrate was questioned by the acting commissioner in his report on the riots. He acknowledged that the Muslim weavers were in difficult circumstances and had recently protested against high prices. 'But the remonstrance of the Julahas about the high prices, though made by a large crowd', he wrote, 'was not made in any spirit of lawlessness'. And

there is no evidence whatsoever to connect them *as a body* [emphasis original] with these outbreaks. Muhammadans were undoubtedly to be found in the crowd of rioters, as is only natural; but we may safely assert that had the Julahas as a body joined the Hindus, the results would have been far more serious. An excited Muhammadan mob is one of the most dangerous elements in society, and bad as things were in the late disturbances, experience tells us what fearful scenes might have been enacted had the industrious but poverty stricken Julahas joined the well-nourished lazy crowd of 'budmashes' who live on the pilgrims and toil not . . .<sup>66</sup>

<sup>65</sup> See K. N. Shukul, *Varanasi Down the Ages*, pp. 289–94; and L/P & J/6/301, no. 907 of 1891. See also Vijayshankar Mall, ed., *Pratapnarayan Granthavali*, pt I (Kashi, 1958), pp. 410–3.

<sup>66</sup> L/P&J/6/301, no. 907 of 1891, J. H. Wright, offg. commissioner to chief secretary, Government of North-Western Provinces and Oudh, 28 April 1891, para. 9.

Here the senior official reveals a marvellous ability to challenge the facile logic of his subordinate without throwing away any of the underlying assumptions—the elements—of colonialist knowledge about Indian society: those ‘most dangerous’ Muslim mobs that create ‘fearful scenes’, the *badmash* or criminal elements that abound in cities like Banaras, ‘rumours such as are always afloat throughout the length and breadth of Indian cities’.<sup>67</sup> It was out of such ingredients, found in all official reports, and out of official ‘common sense’ about the people they governed, that Crooke concocted his statement regarding the ‘turbulent and fanatical’ weavers of Banaras who spread ‘rapine and outrage through the city’ in 1891.

One could go on. But this much of the writing on nineteenth-century Banaras should suffice to indicate that a methodical reconstruction of Indian history was in process as the colonial regime set out to systematize its knowledge and consolidate its power.

## VI

It is perhaps unnecessary to multiply instances to show how widely this process of re-writing of Indian history occurred. However, I shall briefly cite two other examples from the Bhojpuri region and one from outside to illustrate how the structure of the master narrative appears again and again in the writing up of the history of Hindu–Muslim relations, which is taken to be the history of the community *tout court*—the Indian ‘past’—at least in northern India. The first of these examples comes from the Shahabad district of Bihar. It is one of the ‘Notes’ contained in a ‘Supplementary Report (Secret) to the Government of India regarding the Origin of the Bakr-Id Disturbances of 1917’ in that district.<sup>68</sup> The note is dated 31 May 1919 and is written by an official who was posted in Shahabad for a few months in 1893 on special duty in connection with the anti-cow-killing agitation. The author invites attention to the ‘curious parallel’ between the events of 1893 and 1917. In both years,

the riots began in the Patna district, but though they were sufficiently formidable there, they never reached anything like the widespread violence and rapid extension of those in Shahabad . . . on both occasions, the Dumraon Raj, alone of all the great Baronial families of Bihar, was deeply implicated to the point of moral conviction, though short of

<sup>67</sup> Loc. cit., para. 8.

<sup>68</sup> (Bihar State Archives, Patna), political special dept, file no. 223/1919.

actual proof . . . Though the disturbed area during 1893 was comparatively small in Shahabad itself, the disturbances covered all the territories of the Dumraon Raj on the north bank of the Ganges in the districts of Ballia and Azamgarh of the United Provinces.

He notes further that the great zamindars of Tirhut, Darbhanga, Ramgarh, Bettiah, Hathwa, Tikari and so on, who were acquitted of complicity in the riots of 1893, 'are either Brahmins or Bhumihar Brahmins. Dumraon on the contrary is a Rajput'.

In 1893, the official goes on to say, the Maharaja of Dumraon's involvement was partly accounted for by personal interest. Brahmins and cow-protectionists were said to have persuaded him that 'his inability to beget a son was due to "the complaint of the cow" . . . The Maharajah of Rewa (since dead), who married the late Maharajah [Dumraon]'s daughter, was a fanatical supporter of anti-kine-killing propaganda, and had even made himself conspicuous within British territory in this connection. It is believed that he has since blackmailed the present [Dumraon] Zemindar.'<sup>69</sup>

In the events of 1917, however, Dumraon may have been moved more by his ambition to be the undisputed leader of the zamindars of South Bihar.

The late Maharajah of Dumraon was utterly uneducated and boorish, a man of very limited knowledge and intellect. The present man is of a far superior type [*sic*], socially and intellectually, and it may well be believed that his thoroughly experienced European Manager, Mr Wilson, was able to do a good deal to steady him and to open his mind to the reality of facts.

But in 1917 the War was not going too well for Great Britain, and Dumraon may well have feared that his traditional rivals, the Jagdishpur zamindars, might not only enrich themselves but add considerably to their status by taking a leading part in the anti-cow-killing agitation:

On the whole, therefore, . . . there is every ground to believe that the [Dumraon] Raj played exactly the same part as in 1893, i.e. every facility was given to the movement, and the Raj sowars and officials not only did not obstruct but took an underhand part in it, while at the same time every precaution was taken to keep the Maharajah's personality out of the matter . . .

<sup>69</sup> Though no larger than Dumraon and other similar *zamindaris* in Bihar and Bengal, Rewa was a small princely state in Central India (now Madhya Pradesh).

Finally, the note suggests, in both 1893 and 1917 'Extremist politicians' had a hand in the agitation. The Nagpur Congress of '1892 or 1893 [sic] . . . was followed immediately by a meeting in the same Pandal in support of the agitation against kine killing, and the riots of the following year were consequently attributed to the decision then taken'. In 1917, as in 1893, extremist politicians used 'the unquestionably genuine feeling among Hindus on the subject of the cow, as well as . . . the lawless instincts of the disorderly portion of the population, notably in districts like Shahabad and Saran which had formerly been favourable recruiting grounds for the Army'. Ras Bihari Mandal, an important local extremist, 'headed a large organisation of Goalas, of whom there are many in the affected areas, and who are notoriously as prone to dacoity and rioting as the Rajputs of that area.'

The history of the 1917 strife in Shahabad is here reduced to the machinations of big zamindars and a few 'extremist politicians'. The motives of these 'ringleaders' are to be found not only in their personal ambitions, but also in their essential character as a caste or community. Ras Bihari Mandal is a man of 'rascally private character and low birth'. The present Maharaja of Dumraon in spite of his western education and the steady influence of a thoroughly experienced European manager, is after all 'a Rajput'. The circumstances the consciousness, the aspirations of the people of western Bihar, disappear without a trace, except in so far as the Hindus in general have an 'unquestionably genuine feeling' about the cow, which can be fanned into flames at will; and certain communities are congenitally prone to lawlessness: 'the disorderly portion of the population, notably in districts like Shahabad and Saran which had formerly been favourable recruiting grounds for the Army', and the Ahirs or Goalas 'who are notoriously as prone to dacoity and rioting as the Rajputs of that area'.<sup>70</sup>

The specificity of the historical experience of 1917 is also wiped out, 1917 was no different from 1893. In both these instances, the riots began in Patna district (it is not at all clear why this is taken to be so significant) and spread in a far more virulent form to Shahabad. In both, the Dumraon raj was deeply implicated (although the 'disturbed area' in 1893 was 'comparatively small in Shahabad it-

<sup>70</sup> Cf. the Bihar governor's observation in 1942 on the 'notoriously . . . criminal district' of Saran, N. Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power, 1942–47: Volume II, 'Quit India'* (London 1971), p. 789.

self'). In exactly the same way, the organization and activities of extremist nationalist politicians were behind the riots on both occasions.

A very similar line of argument is put forward in a comparison of the 1874 and 1893 riots in Bombay, in a despatch of 26 October 1893 from the Bombay judicial department to the secretary of state for India in council. On both occasions, the despatch notes, the first group to turn to violence were the Muslims and the scene of the outbreak was near the Jama Masjid. However, the outbreak of 1893 was on a much larger scale. On 13 February 1874, officials dispersed the gathering with comparative ease, and the crowd broke up with apparently no plans of further violence, for it was not till the 15th that further trouble occurred near the Muslim cemetery.

The outbreak in 1893 was more 'serious', 'widespread' and 'uncontrollable' than that of 1874. The dispersal of the crowd that initially attacked the Hanuman temple would appear 'to have had the effect of arousing the Muhammedan population of the city generally; and, as will always happen on such occasions, the criminal classes . . . were not slow to avail themselves of the confusion. Much of the looting, and probably some of the deaths, are due rather to the depredations and violence of these classes than to religious excitement'. And so on.<sup>71</sup>

Before discussing these accounts further, it may be well to take up our final example of colonialist writings on communal riots in the nineteenth century. This piece of writing relates to a small habitation not far from Banaras, and like it a centre of handloom production, conducted in the main by Muslim weavers, but in every other respect vastly different from that great Hindu pilgrimage centre. Established probably in the eighteenth century at the instance of some Sheikh Muslim zamindars of the neighbourhood, the weaving *qasba* of Mubarakpur in Azamgarh district was a place of no special sanctity or great renown. The parallels between the colonialist writing up of the history of the people of Mubarakpur and their reconstruction of the history of Hindu-Muslim relations in Banaras are, therefore, all the more striking.

The two-page entry on Mubarakpur in the 1909 *Gazetteer* of Azamgarh district records that the qasba had a population of 15,433 people in 1901, of whom 11,442 were Muslims and 3991 Hindus. It

<sup>71</sup> (IOL) L/P&J/6/362, no. 10, Judl. Dept., Bombay, to secretary of state in council, 26 October 1893.

then proceeds to sum up the 'past' history of social relations in the locality:

The Muhammadans [of Mubarakpur] consist for the most part of fanatical and clannish Julahas, and the fire of religious animosity between them and the Hindus of the town and neighbourhood is always smouldering. Serious conflicts have occurred between the two from time to time, notably in 1813, 1842 and 1904. The features of all these disturbances are similar, so that a description of what took place on the first occasion will suffice to indicate their character. In 1813 a petty dispute about the inclosing within the grounds of a Hindu temple of a little piece of land near a Muhammadan *takia* [*tazia*] platform was followed first by the slaughter on the spot of a cow by the Muhammadans and then by the defiling of the platform and of a neighbouring *imambara* with pig's blood by the Hindus. The Muhammadans retaliated by cruelly murdering a wealthy Hindu merchant of the place named Rikhai Sahu, by plundering and burning his house and by defacing a handsome temple which he had erected. Hereupon the whole Hindu population of the vicinity rose and a sanguinary battle ensued in which the Muhammadans were overpowered after many had been killed and wounded on both sides. The inhabitants of the town fled and the place was given up to plunder for some days till a magistrate arrived with troops from Gorakhpur and restored order. Similar disturbances occurred in 1893–94 and punitive police were quartered on the town for several months.<sup>72</sup>

Note, first, that this history of Mubarakpur appears as part of a notice on a small and fairly 'ordinary' place in a district gazetteer or handbook, whereas the history of Hindu–Muslim strife in Banaras examined earlier appears not only in the *District Gazetteer* and other histories of Banaras but in more general historical statements on British rule and on continuing Hindu–Muslim 'disturbances'. As regards the entry on Mubarakpur, I have written elsewhere of the fact that the alleged 'disturbances' of 1893–4 in the qasba exist nowhere except in the imagination of the writer of this notice.<sup>73</sup> They are, in this respect, not unlike the 'Hindu–Muslim' riots of 1891 and the 'undoubtedly religious' origins of the military-police feud in Banaras in 1810, referred to earlier. I have also dealt elsewhere with the figure of the 'fanatical (or bigoted) Julaha' that appears in this pas-

<sup>72</sup> D. L. Drake-Brockman, *Azamgarh: A Gazetteer, being Vol. XXXIII of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh* (Allahabad, 1911), pp. 260–1.

<sup>73</sup> 'Encounters and Calamities: The History of a North Indian Qasba in the Nineteenth Century', in R. Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies III* (Delhi, 1984).

sage as in Crooke's comments on Banaras.<sup>74</sup> Here I shall refer only to the common structure of the colonial argument on the history of Indian society, whether this is represented in the qasba of Mubarakpur or the populous city of Banaras, or, for that matter, the rural areas of Shahabad.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, point to note is the characterization of the 'past', the pre-British period, as essentially chaotic and unruly. In Mubarakpur, as in Banaras/India, the 'fire of religious animosity' was 'always smouldering'. In Mubarakpur, as in Banaras/India, as in 'districts like Shahabad and Saran' (with their 'disorderly . . . population(s) . . . notoriously prone to dacoity and rioting'), that was what the British administration—'enlightened', 'orderly', 'rational', 'experienced'—was up against from the beginning. The communal riot narrative, as exemplified in these instances, ranges freely through time and space, unfettered by either. In it, all riots are the same—simply the reflexive actions of an irrational people ('fanatical and clannish' Julahas/Muslims, riot-prone Ahirs and Rajputs, 'the whole Hindu (or Muslim) population' that rises blindly when a religious building is attacked, or such an attack is beaten back, 'criminal classes' who take advantage of this; and so on). The geographical location of an outbreak does not appear to make very much difference, as I have already remarked in connection with Cape's identification of the site of the Banaras riot of 1809; the principal features of the narrative are the same for the qasba of Mubarakpur as they are for a *mohalla* in the city of Banaras or Bombay, as they will be for Shahabad or Kanpur or Calcutta. Nor does the date of a clash very significantly alter the plot: the changing conditions of state power are scarcely noticed after the early nineteenth century, the rise of new social identities and aspirations is practically inconceivable, the emergence of new social and political movements appears only to feed into pre-existing loyalties and tendencies. It is well after the end of the nineteenth century that the stubbornness of colonialist historiography gives even a little in this respect.

Throughout the nineteenth century and for long afterwards, the colonial narrative on communal strife tends to proceed by identifying the 'first' major riot, that is, usually the first recorded after the

<sup>74</sup> 'The Bigoted Julaha', in *Review of Political Economy, Economic and Political Weekly*, 15 January 1983.

establishment of British rule (1813 in the case of Mubarakpur, 1809 in that of Banaras), and then tracing a straight line through to the 'last'—which of course keeps changing with the date of the writing (1904 in the case of the entry on Mubarakpur in the *Azamgarh Gazetteer* of 1909; Kanpur 1931 in the Government of India file on 'Communal Disorders' prepared in the early 1930s).

In this mode of history writing one may take any two 'serious riots' and they will stand in for one another, irrespective of conjecture or locale. All that can be usefully compared is magnitude. For a casualty list of the same order as that in the Kanpur riots of 1931, one has to go back to the 'grave Benares riots' of 1809, even though, the official 'Note' adds, 'conditions were *presumably* so different then as to make the two cases not really comparable'.<sup>75</sup> 'Presumably' is a significant word. In such a long time, a good deal ought to have changed. In this slow-moving country, however, it is remarkable how much goes on being just the same.<sup>76</sup> So a description of the 'first' outbreak—1813 in Mubarakpur—suffices to indicate the character of all subsequent strife, just as 1893 more or less adequately explains what happens in Shahabad in 1917, and 1874 what happens in Bombay in 1893 (or 1911, or 1929).

Metaphoric interventions make up for the lack of overt metonymic connections in the 'mature' communal riot narrative, and one might suggest that the frequency of these interventions increases with the passage of time from the 'first' events described.<sup>77</sup> In the absence of detailed description, it is the essentialist signs that represent Mubarakpur/Shahabad/Banaras/India that enable the narrative

<sup>75</sup> L/P&J/7/132, 'Notes' of 19–20 May 1931 (emphasis added).

<sup>76</sup> Hence the same 'Note' compares the pattern of rioting in Bombay and Calcutta and Kanpur. The Bombay riots of 1929, it says, 'originated in fights between oil-strikers and Pathans employed in their places and gradually developed into general murderous assaults by Moslems on Hindus and Hindus on Moslems. As in Calcutta in 1926 there was a second phase [of rioting in April–May 1929 after the initial outbreak in February] and a further resemblance with those riots (and those at Cawnpore) lies in the fact that the disturbances consisted of murders in side lanes rather than riots in the ordinary sense of the word'; loc.cit. (emphasis added).

<sup>77</sup> Cf. R. Guha's comments on 'primary', 'secondary' and 'tertiary' discourse in 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency' in *Subaltern Studies II* (Delhi, 1983). The metaphorical charge is high, as we have seen, even in 'primary' colonial discourse, the 'battlefront' reports of officials on the spot at the time of a 'riot'. But indexical interventions increase significantly as the history is written up for a wider public, even if this is done within days of the outbreak in question. For an extraordinary example of such writing-up, see 'The Disturbances at Benares—August 1852', a

to move along. Thus, ‘fanatical and clannish’ entities, ‘disorderly sections of the population’, communities ‘prone to dacoity and rioting’, ‘fires of religious animosity’, ‘indiscriminate affrays’—these are the phrases that make for the history of Mubarakpur or Banaras or Shahabad in the nineteenth century as told by colonialist writers at the beginning of the twentieth.

This is of course *not* a history, to repeat a point already made, for evidently nothing ever changes in this community. The communal riot narrative cannot but be a history of the state, first because everything in it revolves around the question of ‘law and order’, and equally because if any change occurs in the local society it will occur, by this account, as a result of the efforts and the influence of the colonial state (for example, the education of the young Maharaja of Dumraon and the ‘steadying influence’ of his English manager).

- An outstanding feature of this discourse is its distancing of ‘us’ and ‘them’. In the communal riot narrative, as in colonialist discourse more generally, ‘rioting’, ‘bigotry’, ‘criminality’ are of a piece—the marks of an inferior people and a people without a history. Naturally, even the violence of the subject population is distinguished from the often unacknowledged but, in any case, ‘controlled’, ‘rational’ and ‘legitimate’ violence of the colonial state. ‘Native’ violence has parallels with the violence of the eighteenth- and even nineteenth-century European mob—hungry, displaced, turbulent—which also on occasion turns to rioting. (Happily, the promoters of this view at the turn of the century might have said, Europe was fast ‘civilizing’ its lower classes). But the violence of the ‘native’ has other, specifically Oriental characteristics. It is a helpless, instinctive violence, it takes the form of ‘convulsions’ and, in India, these are more often than not related to the centuries’ old smouldering fire of communal strife. That is all there is to the politics of the indigenous community. That is the Indian past. In the twentieth century a new name would be found for that past: that name was ‘communalism’.

contribution to the *Benares Recorder* made by the Commissioner of Banaras, E. A. Reade, in early August 1852, reprinted in E. A. Reade, *Banares City* (Government Press, Agra, 1858), pp. 63–71.

# Caste and Subaltern Consciousness\*

PARTHA CHATTERJEE

It is now widely recognized among social anthropologists of India that the religious beliefs and practices of subordinate caste groups are quite often based on principles that are contradictory to those of the Brahmanical religion.<sup>1</sup> The question that is raised for us is: what do these observations mean for a description of the consciousness of the subaltern classes? Even at a surface level we can sense the importance of these findings, for, no matter how we choose to characterize it, subaltern consciousness in the specific cultural context of India cannot but contain caste as a central element in its constitution.

But before we proceed to deal with this problem it will be useful to summarize the methodological approach in considering the question of religion as a constitutive force in subaltern consciousness. Since the tenets of the Marxist method have been developed primarily out of the historical records of the class struggles in Europe, a convenient point of departure would be a presentation of the ideas of the one European Marxist who has studied the question of religion in subaltern consciousness with the greatest insight.

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<sup>1</sup> A few examples of empirical work containing detailed observations of this phenomenon are Pauline Maher Kolenda, 'Religious Anxiety and Hindu Fate', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 23 (1964), pp. 71–82; Owen Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability* (New York, 1969), Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in Twentieth-century Punjab* (Berkeley, 1982); R. S. Khare, *The Untouchable as Himself: Ideology, Identity and Pragmatism among the Lucknow Chamars* (Cambridge, 1983); Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology* (Cambridge, 1985).

*The Common Sense: Immediate and Mediated*

In the third part of the English selections from the *Prison Notebooks*—the part entitled ‘The Philosophy of Praxis’—the following characterization will be found of what Antonio Gramsci calls ‘common sense’.<sup>2</sup> The ordinary workers—‘the active man-in-the-mass’—is engaged in practical activity. This necessarily involves some form of understanding of the world which he transforms through his work. But he has ‘no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity.’ Rather,

his theoretical consciousness can be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit and verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed.<sup>3</sup>

Further exploring this contradictory consciousness, Gramsci notes that the contradiction between the implicit and explicit aspects is a reflection of the contradiction between opposing social groups:

It signifies that the social group in question [a subaltern group of great mass] may indeed have its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes—when, that is, the group is acting as an organic totality. But this same group has, for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group; and it affirms this conception verbally and believes itself to be following it, because this is the conception which it follows in ‘normal times’—that is when its conduct is not independent and autonomous, but submissive and subordinate.<sup>4</sup>

We have here the clue to a possible method for analysing the consciousness of the subaltern classes. We see this consciousness as contradictory, fragmented, held together in a more or less haphazard whole—the common sense. It is ‘an ambiguous, contradictory and multiform concept’.<sup>5</sup> It is formed, and transformed, in the course of a historical process which brings dominant and subordinate classes into relations with each other. Common sense, therefore, is the contradictory unity of two opposed elements: one, the auton-

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, tr. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York, 1971), pp. 325–43.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 333.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243

omous element which expresses the common understanding of the members of a subaltern group engaged in the practical activity of transforming the world through their own labour, often at the behest and certainly under the domination of the ruling groups, and the other the element which is borrowed from the dominant classes and which expresses the fact of the ideological submission of the subaltern group.

The specific combination of these two elements is not fixed; it changes in the course of the historical process of relations between dominant and subordinate groups. On the one hand the emergence of new philosophies and religions which acquire a dominant position in society will have its impact through the borrowed element in common sense.

Every philosophical current leaves behind a sedimentation of 'common sense': this is the document of the former's historical effectiveness. Common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas, and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand the emergence to dominance of new religions and new systems of philosophy is also not unrelated to the process of struggle between dominant and subordinate groups. The autonomous element in common sense erupts precisely at the moments of heightened conflict between classes, and at such moments the crisis of society is expressed in the threat of a rupture of the community into two opposed faiths, two opposed religions, two opposed views of the world. The emergence of new religions or social philosophies fulfills the need for restoring, either on a progressive and new basis or on a forcible reassertion of the old basis, the ideological unity of the entire social bloc.

The strength of religions, and of the Catholic church in particular, has lain, and still lies, in the fact that they feel very strongly the need for the doctrinal unity of the whole mass of the faithful and strive to ensure that the higher intellectual stratum does not get separated from the lower.<sup>7</sup>

In the past such divisions in the community of the faithful were healed by strong mass movements which led to, or were absorbed in, the creation of new religious orders centred on strong personalities (St Dominic, St Francis) . . . The heretical movements of the Middle Ages . . . represented a split between masses and intellectuals within the Church. The

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 326n.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 328.

split was 'stitched over' by the birth of popular religious movements subsequently reabsorbed by the Church through the formation of the mendicant orders and a new religious unity.<sup>8</sup>

Religions which succeed in establishing a dominant and universalist moral code for society as a whole can then be looked at from two quite different standpoints. For the dominant groups it offers the necessary ideological justification for existing social divisions, makes those divisions appear non-antagonistic and holds together a potentially divided society into a single whole. For the subordinate masses religion enters their common sense as the element which affords them an access to a more powerful cultural order; the element of religion then coexists and intermingles in an apparently eclectic fashion with the original elements of common sense.

- The one religion will then appear among different social groups and strata in several distinct and particular forms.

Every religion, even Catholicism (indeed Catholicism more than any, precisely because of its efforts to retain a 'surface' unity and avoid splintering into national churches and social stratifications), is in reality a multiplicity of distinct and often contradictory religions: there is one Catholicism for the peasants, one for the *petits-bourgeois* and town workers, one for women, and one for intellectuals which is itself variegated and disconnected.<sup>9</sup>

In studying religion in relation to consciousness, then, the point is to identify in their differences these particular forms of the one religion, and hence to see religion in class-divided society as the ideological unity of two opposed tendencies—on the one hand the assertion of an universal moral code for society as a whole, and on the other the rejection of this dominant code by the subordinated.

The starting point of this critical study will be 'that common sense which is the spontaneous philosophy of the multitude.'<sup>10</sup> In other words the task will be to extract from the immediate reality of the diverse particular forms of religion as believed and practised among various social groups the implicit element which stands in opposition to the dominant form. Gramsci himself makes a few suggestions regarding the general characteristics of this element in common sense as observed in the history of religion in Europe. In the first place, common sense tends to apply a principle of causality

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 331 and 331n.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 420

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 421.

which relies primarily, often exclusively, on direct sense-perception. There is in it 'a certain measure of "experimentation" and direct observation of reality, though empirical and limited.'<sup>11</sup> Second, 'popular religion is crassly materialistic' and even in the 'many beliefs and prejudices' and 'almost all popular institutions (witchcraft, spirits, etc.)' it reveals its closeness to a 'materialist conception'. 'This can be seen in popular Catholicism, and, even more so, in Byzantine orthodoxy'.<sup>12</sup> Third, the explicit and implicit elements in the contradictory consciousness which is common sense appear in turn at moments of submission and moments of historical initiative. When the popular groups lie defeated and scattered,

mechanical determination becomes a tremendous force of moral resistance, of cohesion and of patient and obstinate perseverance . . . It should be emphasised, though, that a strong activity of the will is present even here, directly intervening in the 'force of circumstance', but only implicitly, and in a veiled and, as it were, shamefaced manner . . . But when the 'subaltern' becomes directive and responsible for the economic activity of the masses, mechanicism at a certain point becomes an imminent danger and a revision must take place in modes of thinking . . . if yesterday the subaltern element was a thing, today it is no longer a thing but an historical person, a protagonist; if yesterday it was not responsible, because 'resisting' a will external to itself, now it feels itself to be responsible because it is no longer resisting but an agent, necessarily active and taking the initiative.'<sup>13</sup>

Here Gramsci is also supplying us with a political criterion for a critique of subaltern consciousness. It is not a condemnation of 'fatalism' as a determinate character of subalternity, as argued by those who 'don't even expect that the subaltern will become directive and responsible'. Rather it is shown to be one side of the contradictory essence of subaltern consciousness: 'fatalism is nothing other than the clothing worn by real and active will when in a weak position'.<sup>14</sup> The other side is active, which can absorb new ideas, new techniques, new ways of living, which constantly modifies and enriches common sense by adapting to new conditions of life and work. The critical study of subaltern consciousness

must be a criticism of 'common sense', basing itself initially, however, on common sense . . . it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 396.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 336-7

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 337.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331.

Gramsci's comments suggest to us a methodological approach in which we see subaltern consciousness as contradictory, consisting of two opposed elements—one autonomous and the other borrowed. Similarly, we see the history of religion too as constituted by two opposed tendencies—one the attempt to articulate a universal code for society as a whole, and the other the struggle by the subordinated to resist the dominating implications of this code. Both constituents of the approach will be relevant for the study of consciousness in any class-divided society if we accept the crucial political premise that it is the dominated classes which necessarily bear in their existence the active principle of historical change. Nevertheless, even this relatively schematic ordering of Gramsci's scattered comments on the subject does not resolve our immediate problem. It is incumbent upon us to show that this approach does in fact yield a potentially fruitful way of studying the history of consciousness in the class-divided social formations of India, and second, to identify the specific elements and demarcate the specific ground on which a dialectic of consciousness can be said to operate in our history.

The attempt in this essay will be to argue the validity of this dialectical, as opposed to a synthetic, approach and *inter alia* to suggest some specific questions which we need to explore if we are to give sufficient concreteness to the concept of subaltern consciousness. I do this with particular reference to a contemporary problem—that of mounting an adequate critique of the caste system.

### *The External Critique of Caste*

When a Marxist is confronted with the question of caste, his or her basic response is to try and conceptualize caste relations within a theoretical framework in which class is the central concept. This is perfectly understandable, since the Marxist must contest any argument which claims that while class stratification may be the relevant principle in understanding the history of Europe, Indian society is based on a completely different principle, namely hierarchy, and that consequently caste must replace class as the fundamental explanatory framework. To admit an argument like this would be to discard the generality of class as the central concept for describing the dialectical movement of human history and to throw the Marxist method into the welter of relativism. Now, in making the con-

trary argument, Marxists have chosen either of two approaches. Most have argued that caste is a feature of the superstructure of Indian society and ought to be understood in terms of its efficacy as an ideological system which reflects the basic structure of material (i.e. productive) relations, the latter of course being characterized in terms of class relations. Others have suggested that caste is in fact the specifically Indian form of material relations at the base, with its own historical dynamic; caste, in other words, is the form in which classes appear in Indian society.

Neither approach has thus far enabled the Marxist to reach a satisfactory understanding of the immediate phenomena related to caste as presented in historical evidence or in contemporary events.

The first approach has the advantage of offering a way to historicize the practices of caste. To the extent that the emergence of specific structures of caste relations can be shown to be connected with major historical changes in the productive organization, it can produce explanations of great sweep and richness. Kosambi's works contain several hypotheses of this sort; Dipankar Gupta has recently attempted a historical explanation of the transition from varna to jati;<sup>16</sup> and practically every cultural region of India has its share of studies relating the regional caste structure with changes in production structures over particular historical periods. The crucial difficulty with this approach is that in maintaining the base/superstructure distinction and treating caste as an element of the superstructure explainable by the base, the form of the explanation must become one of functionalism. That is to say, a given set of caste beliefs or practices have to be explained as functionally necessary for the establishment or continuation of particular production relations at the base. The problem of circularity involved in such functional explanations is now well known and need not be elaborated here. Of course, one can extricate the explanation from this tangle of tautology by specifying a necessary sequence to the historical progression of production structures, so that the final explanation would lie not so much in the correspondence of particular superstructural forms with particular structures at the base, but rather in the historical necessity of a specified sequence of modes of production, the logic of transition to the next mode being deter-

<sup>16</sup> Dipankar Gupta, 'From Varna to Jati: The Indian Caste System, from the Asiatic to the Feudal Mode of Production', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 10 (1980), 3, pp. 249–71.

mined by the structure of the previous mode in the sequence. This, however, leads to a problem of a different order; without entering into it at this stage, suffice it to say that a considerable trend in Marxist thinking has rejected the ascription of such a supra-historically ordained sequence of progression of social forms (however specified) in all of human history, and that we locate ourselves unequivocally within that trend.

- The second approach seeks to avoid the problems of the first by treating caste as both the form and basic content of class divisions in Indian society. It is not as though the specific structural relations of caste have not changed over time; in fact, with changes in production organization these have undergone major transformations since the earliest periods of Indian history down to the present day.
- Therefore, as Gail Omvedt argues, caste cannot be characterized as a superstructural form associated with a particular mode of production; it must be seen as form as well as the content of the social relations of production in Indian history. Caste is 'a material reality with a material base', it is 'not only form but also concrete material content', and it has 'historically shaped the very basis of Indian economy and society and continues to have crucial economic implications today.'<sup>17</sup>

On the face of it, this seems to come dangerously close to abandoning the generality of class and replacing it with caste in the case of Indian society. The search for historical specificity, it would appear, must mean a jump into relativism. To save their position, the proponents of this approach must define a distinct basis for the conceptualization of class in Indian history and the determination by it of caste relations. Omvedt attempts to do this by arguing that with the imposition of capitalist relations of production in the colonial period, classes as legal-economic entities came to be formally separated from caste; not only that, the new legal structure of property now constituted the 'caste system' itself as a concretely separate system. Because of the separation of the economic and social levels under conditions of capitalist production, class and caste no longer coincide.

From this, a Marxist could well argue that the historical conditions of knowledge have been now established for looking back on

<sup>17</sup> Gail Omvedt, 'An Introductory Essay' in Omvedt, ed., *Land, Caste and Politics in Indian States* (Delhi, 1982), pp. 9–50.

Indian history as the stages of 'pre-capital' out of whose development has appeared the separation of the 'economic' level as the determinant instance. Unfortunately, this argument too cannot be easily sustained. The 'separation' occurs not because of an immanent development, but by the *external* intervention of colonialism. To the extent that the new conditions of capitalist production are treated as external, a *duality* between the two structures of class and caste becomes unavoidable. Omvedt, therefore, is forced to look for the purely empirical correlation (or lack of it) between class and caste in contemporary history and to talk about the forms of popular struggle in the colonial and post-colonial periods as 'complex', 'very complex', 'highly interconnected', etc.—sure indications that a theoretical conceptualization of the essence of social relations has slipped from her grasp.<sup>18</sup>

It has been clear for a long time that the problem of duality of structures cannot be resolved at the level of production relations at the base, unless of course one resorts to the formal, and eminently vacuous, argument that all productive structures are finally unified at the level of a global capitalist system.<sup>19</sup> The question then becomes one of identifying the appropriate level where the dual structures exist as parts of a whole. Disregarding the validity of the base/superstructure formula, it is my argument that this level cannot be found either in determinate productive structures or in determinate legal-political institutions. As a point of access, this level of unification, its historical effectiveness and its contradictory character need to be sought in social consciousness. The method will be the method of critique, i.e. of identifying the conditions of possibility of the forms

<sup>18</sup> This is not the place for a detailed discussion of Omvedt's considerable, and in every way very important, work on the relation between caste and class in popular struggles in India. But what seems to me as the theoretical inevitability of a slip into empiricism, brought about by her inability to unify the immanence of a dialectic of caste with the imposition of capitalist relations, is well illustrated by her recent article 'The "New Peasant Movement" in India', *In the Wake of Marx* (Calcutta), 3 (1987), 3–4, pp. 3–10. Having argued for a long time that 'the main lines of conflict are no longer between middle and low-caste peasants on one side and high-caste landlords on the other, but are now between the rich farmers and the agricultural labourers-poor peasants', she has now suddenly woken up to the realization, again on purely empirical grounds, that 'the peasant movement, claiming to represent the united interest of all categories of peasants . . . has become perhaps the single biggest mass movement in India.'

<sup>19</sup> Most graphically so after the inconclusive end of the 'mode of production in Indian agriculture' debate of the 1970s.

and content of consciousness, and of determining their sources, extent and limits.

We may recall that in the modern history of Europe the existence of particular interests in capitalist society was sought to be unified by the bourgeois construct of economic man whose concretely universal forms and content were identified by Hegel in the concept of Right. Marx's critique of political economy was designed precisely to show that this universal was itself historically conditioned and its form of equality premised on a necessary inequality between the owners of capitalist property and those dispossessed of their means of production. For countries like India, the concepts of bourgeois equality and freedom, owing to their externality to the immanent forms of social consciousness, cannot even claim the same degree of effectiveness as expressions of the unity of society, despite their formal enshrinement in the political constitution. For this reason, a critique of caste based on the notion of bourgeois equality can never hope to surmount its condition of externality. And yet we cannot, for the same reason, dismiss the reality of the presence of capital in India today. My argument is that an identification of the contradictory essence of popular consciousness is likely to give us better answers regarding the possibilities, forms and limits of capitalist insertion into the social institutions and practices of our people. It is in consciousness, let us remember, that people make sense of the world in which they live; it is in consciousness again that they make their judgements on how to change it.

#### *Requirements of an Immanent Critique of Caste*

1. The starting point is the *immediate* reality of caste, namely the diversity of particular jatis with specific characteristics. Each jati can be shown to have in its particular quality, on the one hand a definition-by-self which is the positive characteristic which identifies the jati as itself, and on the other a definition-for-another by which other jatis are distinguished from it. Any particular qualitative criterion which is supposed to identify a jati will imply both the positive and the negative definitions. Thus, if the Chamar is identified as a caste which disposes of dead cattle, this definition-by-self immediately implies a definition-for-another, namely that other castes (at least, some other castes) do not have this occupation. It is thus that distinctions and classifications by quality can be made among jatis.

Now, these distinctive qualities of particular castes are finite and hence alterable. We have innumerable examples of the qualitative marks of particular jatis varying both regionally and over time. We also know that there is a multiplicity of qualitative criteria which can serve to distinguish jati from jati. This finiteness of quality is negated by a definition-for-self of caste which shows the diverse individual castes to be many particular forms, distinguished by quantity, of one universal measure of caste. To give an example from another scientific field, particular commodities are immediately distinguishable from one another by a variety of finite qualities, but a definition-for-self of commodity, namely value, enables us to order by quantity, i.e. exchange-value, the entire range of particular commodities. Similarly, we can make determinate distinctions by quantity among all castes if we have a similar definition-for-self of caste. The most powerful candidate in sociological literature for this definition of 'casteness' is hierarchy. According to this argument, hierarchy fixes a universal measure of 'casteness' so that, at any given time and place, the immediate qualitative diversity of jatis can be ordered as a quantitative ranking in a scale of hierarchy. The universal measure appears for each particular caste as a determinate position, quantitatively fixed (higher/lower) and hence comparable, in the hierarchy of all castes. Thus the move is made from the unintelligibility of immediate diversity to an identification of the *being-for-self* of caste. Now it is possible to identify *determinate* castes, here and now, as an ordered set, unambiguous and non-contradictory, at least in principle. In fact, like the Maitre de Philosophie telling M. Jourdain that he had been speaking prose all his life without knowing it, this is precisely what Louis Dumont tells us in Chapter Two of *Homo Hierarchicus*:<sup>20</sup> he uses the substantive material of caste ethnology to fix the determinate being of castes.

2. Dumont does something more, which also happens to be the next step in our immanent critique of caste. The being-for-self of caste, namely hierarchy, can be shown to imply a contradictory *essence*. As soon as we try to arrange the determinate, here-and-now, evidence of the ethnological material in a sequence of change, we will discover in place of the immediacy of being, on the one hand the reflected or mediated self-identity of caste and on the other a self-repulsion or difference. Dumont identifies from within the im-

<sup>20</sup> Translated by Mark Sainsbury (London, 1970).

mediacy of caste practices a contradictory essence, mediated by ideology (or religion), namely the opposition between purity and pollution. While the need to maintain purity implies that the castes must be kept separate (thus, Brahmins cannot engage in the polluting occupations of the menial castes), it also necessarily brings the castes together (since Brahmins cannot do without the menial castes if their economic services are to be provided). The unity of identity and difference—in this case, *vide Dumont*, the unity of purity and pollution—gives us the *ground* of caste as a totality or system. The being of caste is here shown as mediated; its existence is now relative in terms of its inter-connections with other existents within the totality of the ground. Dumont devotes the greater part of his book to defending his case that the unity of the opposites purity/pollution provides adequate ground for defining the totality of caste relations as a system.

Once grounded, the immediate relation in the system of caste will appear as the relation between the whole and the parts. Only the parts have independent being, but the relations between the parts themselves are the result of the contradictory unity of identity and difference. The parts can be held together only if they are mediated into self-relation within the whole of the system by *force*. In Dumont's treatment, the force which holds together the different castes within the whole of the caste system is the ideological force of *dharma*. It is the construct of dharma which assigns to each jati its place within the system and defines the relations between jatis as the simultaneous unity of mutual separateness and mutual dependence.

The movement of force must make apparent the process of uniting the essence of a system with its existence. Here, Dumont's claim is categorical. The central argument of his work is that the ideological force of dharma does in fact unite the mediated being of caste with its ideality. Thus the ideal construct of dharma is actualized in the immediacy of social institutions and practices. This claim is central not merely in Dumont; it must in fact be central to all synthetic constructions of the theory of caste, for all such theories must claim that the conflicting relations between the differentiated parts of the system (namely jatis) are effectively united by the force of dharma so that the caste system as a whole can continue to reproduce itself. I have here chosen to use Dumont's book as the most powerful and persuasive construction of the synthetic theory of caste.

3. In order to make a critique of the ideology of caste, then, we

must show that this process of actualization necessarily contains a contradiction. We must show, in other words, that the unification of the essence of caste with its existence through the movement of the force of dharma is inadequate and one-sided; it is a resolution which reveals its falsity by concealing the contradiction within it. This is the crucial step in the critique of caste. By locating our critique at this level, where the claim that the mediated being of caste (i.e. its ideality) has been actualized in immediate social reality is brought under critical examination, we look at caste neither as base nor as superstructure but precisely as the level of social reality which claims to unite the two. If this claim can be shown to be false, i.e. if the idea of caste can be shown to be *necessarily* at variance with its actuality, we will have the elementary means for an immanent critique of caste.

It can be shown that Dumont traverses the first two stages of this dialectic without attempting to move to the third. It is at the third stage that a Marxist critique, properly conceived, of Dumont must be grounded. There may of course be several inaccuracies or incorrect statements in Dumont's delineation of the movement in the first two stages. To point these out is undoubtedly justified, but it would not amount to a critique of Dumont, for it is theoretically possible to modify the actual contents of *Homo Hierarchicus* to yield a more correctly constituted Dumont-type construction. The critique must consist in showing the inherent plausibility and justification of the transition from the second to the third stage—and that is a move that will destroy the central claim of Dumont (or of any synthetic construction of that type) that ideality lies united with actuality in the immediate social reality of caste.

Interestingly, Dumont seems to be aware of this line of attack, and in his 1979 Preface has attempted to fortify his position against it by declaring that the anthropologist's construction of a global ideology can never hope to 'cover without contradiction the entire field of its application' and must, at every stage, leave a certain irreducible residue in the observed object. The demand for an ideology which is 'identical in its breadth and content to the reality as lived' is, he says, the demand of idealism, 'and it is surprising to see it formulated by the same critics who have reproached us in the name of empiricism for granting too much importance to ideas and values.' He then states his own position, now suitably modified: 'At the most general level, what our conclusion means is that hierarchic-

al ideology, like egalitarian ideology, is not perfectly realised in actuality, or, in other terms does not allow direct consciousness of all that it implies.<sup>21</sup> One could, of course, say to Dumont that he cannot have it both ways. But let us refrain from raising this obvious objection, and point out instead that the matter is not simply one of the *empirical* residue of unexplained observations. Our objection will be that any Dumont-like construction of the ideology of caste will be necessarily at variance with its actuality because the unification is contested *within* the 'observed object', i.e. within the immediate system of castes.

We may also note here that Dumont himself acknowledges that he has confined himself to the first two stages of the movement we have delineated above: his object, he says, is to 'understand' the caste system, not to criticize it. Speaking from within the system of castes, we cannot, unfortunately, afford this anthropologist's luxury, notwithstanding the fact that many Indian anthropologists, in the mistaken belief that this is the only proper scientific attitude to culture, have presumed to share the same observational position with their European teachers. Dumont further says that his is a study of 'structure', not of 'dialectic'. The oppositions within his structure do not 'produce' anything; they are static and not surpassed through a 'development'; the global setting of the structure is given once and for all.<sup>22</sup> We are, of course, looking for contradictions that are dialectical, where oppositions are surpassed through negation, producing a developed unity and, once again, a new set of contradictions. We do not, however, agree with Dumont that the dialectical method is necessarily 'synthetic'. It is rather the Dumont-type method of 'structure', where the whole is a 'structural' rather than a 'dialectical' whole, which, when applied to immediate phenomena bearing the unexamined content of history, becomes profoundly 'synthetic' in its assertion that all oppositions are necessarily contained within a global unity 'given once and for all'.

### *Dumont Disinterred*

It would be redundant here to attempt a review of the contents of such a well-known work as *Homo Hierarchicus*. I propose instead

<sup>21</sup> *Homo Hierarchicus*, revised English edition (Delhi, 1988), p. xxx.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 242–3.

to rearrange the materials of a recent criticism of Dumont by Dipankar Gupta in terms of the framework outlined above and then assess what remains to be done for an adequate critique to emerge.<sup>23</sup>

Gupta's central criticism of Dumont consists in questioning the latter's claim that the essence of caste lies in a continuous hierarchy along which castes can be ordered in terms of relative purity. Gupta's counter-argument is that the essence of caste lies in differentiation into separate and discrete endogamous jatis; the attribute of hierarchy is a property which does not belong to the essence of caste, and in any case where hierarchy exists it is not purity/pollution which is the necessary criterion.

A little reflection will show that, put in this form, the criticism cannot be sustained. The discreteness of separate endogamous jatis is of course the most obvious aspect of the immediate phenomenon of caste. When this separateness is seen as based on qualitative differences, we necessarily have for each jati its being-by-self and being-for-another, involving, in this case, the ascription of the natural differences of biological species on an order of cultural differentiation. Every recognized qualitative attribute of a jati serves to establish its *natural* difference from other jatis, and this difference is upheld above all in the rule of endogamy which lays down that the natural order of species must not be disturbed. Kane notes the agreement of all medieval *dharmashastra* texts on this point and cites the *Sutasambhita* which states explicitly that the 'several castes are like the species of animals and that caste attaches to the body and not to the soul'.<sup>24</sup> The point, however, is that as soon as these discrete jatis are recognized as particular forms belonging to the same class of entities, i.e. they are all recognized as *castes*, the finiteness of discrete qualities will be negated by a being-for-self of caste embodying the universal measure of 'casteness'. Dumont identifies this universal measure as one of having a place in the hierarchy of caste. In relation to this being-for-self, particular castes can only be distinguished from one another by quantity, namely their relative

<sup>23</sup> Dipankar Gupta, 'Continuous Hierarchies and Discrete Castes', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19, 46–8 (17 and 24 November and 1 December 1984), pp. 1955–8, 2003–5, 2049–53.

<sup>24</sup> P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmashastra*, vol. 2, part 1 (Poona, 1974), p. 52. It is thus that when the exception to endogamy is allowed, it is only in the case of *anuloma*, which literally means 'with the hair', that is, in the natural order, and never in the case of *pratiloma*, which would be against the natural order.

place in that hierarchy. An ordering among determinate castes will then be necessarily implied. (Continuity is not, strictly speaking, necessary, even in Dumont's scheme: an unambiguous and transitive ranking by quantity is all that is required.) Gupta's criticism here is misplaced, for the critique of Dumont's method cannot be sustained at the level of the determinate being of caste.

Gupta, however, makes another set of criticisms which is far more promising. There is no one caste ideology, he says, but several, sharing some principles in common but articulated at variance and even in opposition to one another. Now, this is a criticism which is levelled at the essence of caste as identified by Dumont. We have seen already that Dumont locates the essence of caste on the religious ground defined by the oppositions purity/pollution and claims that the force of dharma unites the determinate parts (the separate jatis) into a whole. To establish this claim, however, Dumont has first to dispose of a rather serious problem which arises in establishing the unity of the actuality of the institutions and practices of caste with its ideality. This problem has to do with the fact that the actual rankings of caste take variable forms in space (regional caste systems) and in time (caste mobility) and further that these specific orderings are not necessarily consistent with an ideal ordering in terms of purity/pollution. Dumont attempts to solve this problem, first, by positing an absolute separation between dharma and *artha*, and then asserting the absolute superiority of the former to the latter. This enables him to allow power (economic, political) to play a residual role in the actual ranking of castes; specifically, the quantitative criterion of hierarchical ordering becomes a weighted numeraire where purity/pollution is the only variable which is allowed to fix the two extreme poles of the scale of ranking while power variables are allowed to affect the ordering in the middle.

There is something inelegant in this solution offered by Dumont and a large number of his critics have produced both textual and practical evidence of show that his assertion here is doubtful. But Gupta's criticism that there is not one caste ideology (dharma) but several has the potential, if adequately theorized, for a more serious critique of Dumont. If substantiated, it would amount to saying that the very universality of dharma as the ideality of caste is not generally acknowledged by every part of the system of castes. This criticism would hold even if Dumont's specific characterization of dharma is modified to take care of the factual inaccuracies; in other

words the criticism would hold for any synthetic theory of caste.

To develop these criticisms into a theoretical critique of Dumont one would need to show: (1) that the immediate reality of castes represents the appearance not of one universal ideality of caste, but of several which are not only at variance but often in opposition; (2) that the universal dharma which claims to be the force binding the parts of the system into a whole is a one-sided construction; (3) that this one-sided ideality succeeds in its assertion of universality not because of the self-conscious unity of subject and object in each individual part but because of the effectiveness of a relation of domination and subordination; and (4) that the fragmented and contradictory consciousnesses represent an actuality that can be unified only by negating the one-sided ideality of the dominant construction of dharma.

Let me state the implications of this project. I am suggesting, first, that there is in popular beliefs and practices of caste an implicit critique which questions the claim of the dominant dharma to unify the particular jatis into a harmonious whole and which puts forward contrary claims. Second, just as the effectiveness of the claims of the one dharma is contingent upon the conditions of power, so also are the possibilities and forms of the contrary claims conditioned by those relations of power. Third, in their deviance from the dominant dharma, the popular beliefs draw upon the ideological resources of given cultural traditions, selecting, transforming and developing them to cope with new conditions of subordination but remaining limited by those conditions. Finally, the negativity of these contrary claims is an index of their failure to construct an alternative universal to the dominant dharma and is thus the mark of subalternity; the object of our project must be to develop, make explicit and unify these fragmented oppositions in order to construct a critique of Indian tradition which is at the same time a critique of bourgeois equality.

What we have identified here are therefore the requirements for an immanent critique of caste ideology. The critique itself cannot be sustained unless one can address the corpus of caste ethnology right up to our contemporary times from this standpoint. I cannot claim any such expertise for myself. All I can attempt here is a brief illustrative exercise to show some of the possibilities of this approach. The interested reader may wish to compare my approach with Dumont's treatment of the same problem in his essay 'World Re-

nunciation in Indian Religions'.<sup>25</sup> Whereas Dumont treats the series of oppositions—life in the world/life of the renoucer, group religion/disciplines of salvation, caste/individual—as having been unified within the ‘whole’ of Hinduism by integration at the level of doctrinal Brahmanism and by toleration at the level of the sects, I will offer a different interpretation which treats these oppositions as fundamentally unresolved—unified, if at all, not at the level of the self-consciousness of ‘the Hindu’ but only within the historical contingencies of the social relations of power.

### *The Dharma of the Minor Sects*

The so-called ‘minor religious sects’ of Bengal commanded, at various points of time between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, the following of quite a major section of the population of Bengal. Ramakanta Chakrabarty has compiled a list of fifty-six heterodox sects of this kind, many of which survive to this day.<sup>26</sup> Of these, the Baul, the Jaganmohani, the Kartabhaja, the Kisoribhajan, the Sahebdhani and a few others are relatively well known, the Kartabhaja in particular attracting much attention for its easy syncretism from the Calcutta intelligentsia in the nineteenth century, and the Baul, of course, having been granted cultural benediction in the twentieth by its elevation to the status of an export item in the Festival of India circuit. Most of these sects are broadly classified as Vaisnava or semi-Vaisnava, but it is heterodoxy which is the hallmark of their status as ‘minor sects’. Besides the general presence of what is loosely described as Sahajiya Vaisnavism, observers have variously noted the strong doctrinal and ritual influence on these sects of Buddhist Sahajiya ideas, of ‘left’ Tantric practices, of the religion of the Nath cults, of Sufi doctrines and of the Dharma cult of lower Bengal. The other crucial characteristic is that their following was predominantly, though not always exclusively, among the lower castes.

If one situates the rise of these cults in relation to the history of Vaisnavism in Bengal, the crucial development that has to be noticed is the systematic introduction of caste practices in the religious and social life of orthodox Vaisnavas. Ramakanta Chakrabarty

<sup>25</sup> *Homo Hierarchicus*, revised English edition, Appendix B, pp. 267–86.

<sup>26</sup> *Vaisnavism in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1985), p. 349.

suggests that caste rules began to be strictly applied after the historic festival held in Kheturi (Rajshahi) sometime between 1576 and 1582, which was attended by representatives of nearly a hundred Vaisnava groups from all over Bengal.<sup>27</sup> The Kheturi council laid down the doctrinal and ritual framework of what was to become the dominant orthodoxy of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, based on canons prescribed by the *gosvamis* of Vrindavan.<sup>28</sup> The attempt, as Hitesranjan Sanyal suggests, may have been on the one hand to provide doctrinal respectability to a relatively unsophisticated popular religious movement by engaging in the discourse of Puranic Brahmanism and the great systems of Vaisnava religious thought, and on the other to create the forms of practical religion which would integrate the diverse Sahajiya Vaisnava cults into the main trend of the bhakti movement.<sup>29</sup>

But soon enough, the differentiated forms of social identity and distinction appeared in the body of the Vaisnava *sampraday*. In contrast with the earlier phase of the movement when several prominent non-Brahman Vaisnava gurus such as Narahari Sarkar, Narottam Datta or Rasikananda had Brahman disciples, or unlike the 'neo-Brahman' phase when some Vaisnavas such as the followers of Shyamananda Pal in Midnapore began to wear the sacred thread irrespective of caste, the new orthodoxy which grew up frowned upon such practices. Indeed, the emphasis now was against indiscriminate proselytization, and the highest status was accorded among Vaisnavas to the Brahman *kulaguru* who acted as initiator and spiritual guide to a small number of respectable upper caste families. Gradually, a clearly recognized social distinction emerged between

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 321.

<sup>28</sup> Five of this celebrated circle of six *gosvamis* were Brahmins. The intellectual leaders of the circle—the brothers Rupa and Sanatana and their nephew Jiva—were Karnataka Brahmins settled in Bengal and came from a family of senior ministers to the Bengal Sultan. They are said to have considered themselves somewhat impure because of their close contact with the *mlecchas*, but were all highly learned in the philosophical and literary disciplines. Gopala Bhatta is also said to have been a Karnataka Brahman. Raghunatha Bhatta was a Brahman settled in Varanasi, and may have been of Bengali origin, while Raghunatha Dasa was from a Kayastha landlord family of Hooghly. The last two, however, made virtually no significant contribution to the doctrinal development of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. See Sushil Kumar De, *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1961), pp. 111–65.

<sup>29</sup> Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'Trends of Change in the Bhakti Movement in Bengal', Occasional Paper 76 (July 1985), Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

high-caste Gaudiya Vaisnava householders and the low-caste *jat vaisnav* (i.e. Vaisnava by caste) who were for all practical purposes regarded by the former as outcastes. Indeed, a whole series of stereotypes of the *jat vaisnav*, combining the familiar prejudices of caste impurity with aspersions on their sexual morality, emerged to condemn the low-caste converts beyond the pale of the orthodox Gaudiya Vaisnava sampraday. The sexual aspersions, in particular, derived from the simplicity of the marriage ceremony practised by the followers of most minor sects which explicitly rejected the injunctions of the *smritis*; upper-caste Vaisnavas refused to regard these as proper weddings. Further, the sects were looked down upon for the refuge they often provided to widows and abandoned women;<sup>30</sup> it was believed that the women were engaged in illicit liaisons with cult-followers and used in orgiastic rituals, and the ranks of the sect were swelled by the children of such unsanctified unions.

Seen from the standpoint of the history of Vaisnavism in Bengal, this imposition of more or less orthodox caste practices on the Vaisnava movement was part of the same process which gave rise to the deviant sects. As historians have pointed out, it was a situation where, after a spell of substantial mobility and readjustment of positions mostly in the middle rungs of the caste hierarchy in Bengal, and a significant process of incorporation of tribal populations in the peripheral regions into some form of Puranic religious practice,<sup>31</sup> the dominant ideological need was to reproduce a stable structure of social divisions within a harmonious whole. A universalizing religion such a Vaisnavism could only unify by accommodating those differences within itself. The points of historical interest for us, therefore, are first the doctrinal and practical means by which this was attempted, and second the marks of unresolved and continuing conflict which this process of unification bears.

'The assertion of Brahmanical dominance,' says Ramakanta Chakrabarty, 'in a religious movement which was rooted in mystic-

<sup>30</sup> The slurs on the sexual reputation of the women followers of Vaisnava sects are legion. A popular saying has a Vaisnava woman declaring: 'I was a prostitute first, a maid-servant later, and a procuress in between; now at last I am a Vaisnavi.' (*Age besye, pare dasye, madhye madhye kutni, sarba karma parityajya ekhan bostami*) Sushilkumar De, *Bamla prabod* (Calcutta, 3rd ed., 1986), p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> For an account of these processes in the period of Caitanya and after, see Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1981), pp. 33–64.

ism, and which was anti-caste and anti-intellectual, inevitably led to the growth of deviant orders.<sup>32</sup> He then gives an account of the origins, mostly in the eighteenth century, of some of these orders which were usually founded by Vaisnavas from the 'touchable' Sudra castes and which usually had a following among the trading and artisanal castes, the untouchables and sometimes tribals converted to the new faith.

In talking about the doctrinal beliefs and ritual practices of these sects, the usual description offered is 'eclecticism'. Thus: 'The spread of Vaisnavism among the low castes strengthened eclectic tendencies. Eclecticism was produced by a combination of circumstances.'<sup>33</sup> Chakrabarty lists some of these: the secret practice by Vaisnava gurus of Tantric worship while openly professing Vaisnavism, the continued respect for folk gods and goddesses among Vaisnava converts, the obeisance paid to Krishna, Radha and Chaitanya by non-Vaisnava medieval poets, even Muslim poets, and in non-Vaisnava temple art, and the participation of non-sectarians, including Muslims, in Vaisnava festivals. But to characterize these faiths as eclectic is, of course, nothing more than to acknowledge that they cannot be classified under one or the other of the well-known and dominant theological systems. It is, as a matter of fact, merely to recognize that the existence of these sects is itself evidence of an unstable layering in popular consciousness of material drawn from diverse dominant as well as subordinate traditions, the only principle of unity being the contradictory one of simultaneous acceptance and rejection of domination. To characterize the particular structure of this consciousness, we must identify in the particular historical conjuncture, the specific form of this contradictory unity.

What were the doctrinal means used by Vaisnavism to construct the unity of an internally divided community? In the post-Chaitanya phase, the fundamental devotional attitude of bhakti was itself explicated along two lines. On the one hand, the more orthodox strand following upon the canonical strictures of the Vrindavan *gosvamis* insisted on the performance by ordinary devotees of *vaidhi* or ritually sanctioned bhakti. The *Haribhaktivilasa* of Gopala Bhatta Gosvamin became the authoritative text for this form of Vaisnava devotion and it went a long way in reconciling the ideal

<sup>32</sup> *Vaisnavism in Bengal*, p. 324.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 342.

of Vaisnava love with the ritual norms of Brahmanical caste practices. On the other hand Gaudiya Vaisnavas also granted doctrinal sanction to what was called *raganuga bhakti*, which had a more mystical inward form and which was said to originate in an unbearable desire or thirst for God in the being of the devotee. Although the forms of *raganuga* devotion soon acquired their own disciplinary modes of practice, and the orthodox school insisted that they could be open only to a select few, the important point was that these forms were not required to conform to scriptural injunctions or institutional arrangements. This was the first mode of doctrinal differentiation by which the religion of Vaisnavism in Bengal would try to unify its fold of believers. It provided a means by which Vaisnava householders could retain their allegiance to the faith while participating in the ritual procedures of social and personal life as laid down in the shastras, whereas the deviant orders of the *sahajiya sadhak* could also proclaim to their followers the esoteric connection between their pursuit of ecstatic bhakti and the doctrinal principles of the main body of the movement.

The second mode of differentiation was provided in the forms and methods of Vaisnava worship. It took some time, and a fair amount of debate, for the idea of Chaitanya as an incarnation of Krishna to be firmly fixed, and even then there was much controversy about a suitable hagiology that would replicate the divine deeds at Vrindavan with those at Nabadwip, a matter complicated further by the Gaudiya doctrine of Chaitanya as the dual incarnation of Krishna as well as Radha. But the crucial concept which gained predominance within the Bengal school of Vaisnavism and which enabled a wide variety of forms of devotional worship to be doctrinally unified was the theory of *parakiya* love. Shashibhusan Das Gupta has shown how the celebration in Vaisnava thought of the extra-marital love of Krishna and Radha was appropriated into the forms of an earlier tradition in Bengal of yogic practices leading to the state of *mahasukha* or *sahaja* as conceived in Tantric Buddhism.<sup>34</sup> But the important point for us is that even in this process of transformation, the doctrine of *parakiya* love became internally differentiated. While it was generally acknowledged that the *lila* of Krishna and Radha was the means by which Krishna in his active, worldly, quality-infused form of *bhagavan* realized the

<sup>34</sup> *Obscure Religious Cults* (Calcutta, 1969), pp. 113–46.

unity of his ultimate nature or *svarupa-sakti* in the form of an infinite state of love or bliss, the attitude of the Vaisnava devotees to this sport of the gods came to be structured in a differentiated form.

The Gaudiya orthodoxy (or at least that section of it which subscribed to the superiority of parakiya over svakiya love) insisted that the *radhabhava*, or the attitude of worship of Krishna as a married woman for her lover, was proper only to Sri Chaitanya himself. For his devotees, the prescribed attitude of worship was that of the *sakhi* or the *manjari* who comprised a differentiated circle of female companions of the divine couple and whose task it was to act as reverential accomplices, attendants and voyeurs to the sacred union. In time, especially in the post-Kheturi phase, the orthodox prescription to devotees was to adopt the manjari mode of worship, for only by choosing to serve as the humble attendant could one eliminate from one's person all traces of *purusabhimana* which was proper only to Krishna and not to a true Vaisnava devotee. For the latter, the eternal sport of *nityavrndavana* was only a memory to be cherished, contemplated and ritually remembered in daily life.<sup>35</sup> It was a prescription which seems to have opened a way for personal peace and harmony through a devout religiosity but only at the cost of an all-suffering social quiescence.

The deviant sahajiya orders, however, turned their affiliation to parakiya worship in a wholly contrary direction. They subscribed to the doctrine of eternal love as represented in the *lila* of Krishna and Radha in *nityavrndavana* and called it the state of sahaja or supreme bliss, but argued that it was possible for mortal men and women living in a gross material world to make the transition to the state of supreme love through a disciplined process of spiritual culture or *sadhan*. The sahajiyas supplemented the orthodox doctrine of *bhakti* with a theory of *aropa*, i.e. the attribution of divinity to mortal men and women, and thus effected its transformation into a fundamentally different doctrine. The argument now was that the *svarupa* or true spiritual self resided within the physical form (*rupa*) of every human being and had to be realized in its developed and perfect state without denying or annihilating his or her physical existence. Indeed, it is human love, moving from the gross forms of carnal desire through successive stages of spiritual development, which

<sup>35</sup> The activity of 'remembrance' of the *lila* was ritually formalized in the eighteenth century. See Chakrabarty, *Vaisnavism in Bengal*, pp. 309–18.

finally attains the perfect and infinite forms of divine love while retaining and subsuming within it the earlier forms. Through such a process of sadhan, it is possible for men and women to realize the svarupa of Krishna and Radha in their own selves.

As a doctrine this was heretical, and the actual procedures of pārakiya love practised by the various sahajiya sects were looked upon by 'respectable' Vaisnava householders as unclean and disreputable. Sometimes there were fairly violent attempts at suppression, such as in the *pasandidalan* diatribes launched by the defenders of Brahmanical orthodoxy and in the unrelenting campaigns by the Islamic orthodoxy to suppress the various *marfati* sects, and particularly the Bauls. At other times they were allowed to exist, but as degraded orders on the peripheries of normal social life. Nevertheless, the possibility of a doctrinal attachment between the domain of the 'regular and orthodox on the one hand and that of the degraded and deviant on the other, through an appropriation of one or the other meaning of the inherently polysemic concepts which sought to unify the field of dogma and ritual, meant that on either side the unity, however tenuous, of the whole could be emphasized when required, just as the irreconcilability of differences could also be asserted if necessary.

The question of identity or difference, one dharma or many dharmas, then becomes not so much a matter of judging the inherent strength of the synthetic unification proclaimed by a dominant religion. Any universalist religion, as we have argued, will bear in its essence the contradictory marks of identity and difference, the parts being held together in a whole by an ideological force that proclaims, with varying degrees of effectiveness, its unity. The question, rather, becomes a historical one of identifying the determinants that make this unity a matter of *contingency*.

It will be apparent from the histories of the minor sects that the varying intensities of their affiliation with the larger unity, the degree of 'eclecticism', the varying measures and subtleties in emphasizing their difference and their self-identity, reveal not so much the desire to create a new universalist system but rather varying strategies of survival, and of self-assertion. The Bauls openly proclaim their unconventionality and rejection of scriptural injunctions, both Brahmanical and Islamic, but live as mendicants outside society. They talk of love and the divine power which resides in all men and women and thus engage philosophically in the discourses both

of Vaisnavism and Sufism and yet are marked out as unorthodox and deviant, not a proper part of the congregation. They enthrall their audiences by singing, with much lyricism, subtlety and wit, of the 'man of the heart' and the 'unknown bird' which flies in and out of the cage which is the human body, but practise their own disciplines of sadhan and worship in secret, under the guidance of the *murshid*.<sup>36</sup> Of sects which live on among a lay following of ordinary householders, most do not display any distinct sect-marks on the person of the devotee, so that in their daily lives the sectarians are largely indistinguishable from others. What they offer to their followers, as in the case of the Kartabhaja or the Sahebdhani, is a congregational space defined outside the boundaries of the dominant religious life, outside caste society or the injunctions of the *shariat*, but a space brought into active existence only periodically, at thinly attended weekly meetings with the *mahasay* or the fakir, and at the three of four large annual festivals where sectarians perform the prescribed duties of allegiance to their preceptor and their faith, while numerous others come just as they would to any religious fair—to eat and drink, listen to the music, pick up a few magic cures for illnesses and disabilities and generally to collect one's share of virtue which is supposed to accrue from such visits. The doctrines preached by the sect leaders, often in language which conceals under its surface imagery an esoteric meaning open only to initiates, will talk of their rejection of the Vedas and of caste, of idolatry and sastri or shariati ritual, but the greater their reach across the caste hierarchy, the less strident is their critical tone and the more vapid their sentiments about the sameness of all faiths. The Kartabhajas, for instance, originated in the eighteenth century from a founder who was probably of Muslim origin, but the sect was organized in its present form in the early nineteenth century by a prosperous Sadgop family. It has retained its following among the middle and lower castes, and in particular draws a very large number of women, especially widows, to its festivals, but a fair number of upper-caste people have also been initiated into the faith. Not surprisingly, a distinction has been innovated between the *vyavaharik* or the practical social aspect of the life of the devotee and the *paramarthik* or

<sup>36</sup> On the Baul, see Upendranath Bhattacharya, *Bamlar baul o baul gan* (Calcutta, 1957). On the relationship between the Baul and the Sufi doctrines, also see Muhammad Enamul Huq, *A History of Sufi-ism in Bengal* (Dhaka, 1975), pp. 260–367.

supreme spiritual aspect, the former virtually becoming marked as a ground of inevitable compromise and surrender to the dominant norms of society and the latter the secret preserve of autonomy and self-assertion.<sup>37</sup>

All of these, then, are strategies devised within a relationship of dominance and subordination, and they take on doctrinal or ritual attributes and acquire different values according to the changing contingencies of power. But in all their determinate manifestations in particular historical circumstances, they are shaped by the condition of subalternity. I now propose to discuss the case of a minor sect whose historical effectiveness in propagating a deviant religion for the lowest castes seems to have been particularly unsuccessful: let us see if even this rather extreme case of 'failure' tells us something about the strategies of resistance and assertion.

### *A Teacher among the Hadi*

Along with the Dom, the Hadi is an archetypal, *antaja* caste of Bengal. It is not particularly numerous in Nadia district where in 1931 it constituted only about 0.02 per cent of all untouchable castes and was considerably fewer in number than the Bagdi, Muchi, Namasudra or Malo which comprised the bulk of the 30 per cent or so of the Hindu population of that district which was classifiable as untouchable.<sup>38</sup> But it stands as a cultural stereotype of the lowest among the low; thus, for instance, when a Chittagong saying ridicules the proclivity among low castes to assert mutual superiority in ranking, it illustrates the fact precisely by picking out the Hadi and the Dom: 'The Dom thinks he is purer than the Hadi, the Hadi thinks he is purer than the Dom.'<sup>39</sup> Risley classifies the Hadi as 'a menial and scavenger class of Bengal Proper' with whom no one will eat and from whom no one will accept water.<sup>40</sup> The Hadis have

<sup>37</sup> On the Sahebdhani, see Sudhir Chakrabarti, *Sahebdhani sampraday: tader gan* (Calcutta, 1985); on the Kartabhaja, see the brief account in Chakrabarty, *Vaisnavism in Bengal*, pp. 346–84.

<sup>38</sup> Computed from Imperial Table xvii, *Census of India, 1931*, vol. 5 (Bengal and Sikkim), part 2, pp. 226–42. The Hadi is in fact more numerous in the western districts of Bengal such as Burdwan, Birbhum and Midnapore.

<sup>39</sup> 'Hadittun dom kulin, domattun hadi kulin.' Mohammad Hanif Pathan, ed., *Bamla prabad pariciti*, vol. 2, part 1 (Dhaka, 1982), p. 86.

<sup>40</sup> H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, vol. 1 (Calcutta, 1981), pp. 314–16.

priests of their own and are forbidden from entering the courtyards of the great temples. In the nineteenth century, they sometimes had tenancy rights in land as occupancy or non-occupancy raiyats, but were mostly day-labourers in agriculture, while their traditional occupations were the tapping of date-trees, making bamboo implements, playing musical instruments at weddings and festivals, carrying palanquins, serving as syces, and scavenging. The removal of night-soil was confined exclusively to the Methar subcaste. Risley reports that the Hadis also preferred infant-marriage and permitted both divorce and the remarriage of widows, although the synonymous caste of Bhuinmali in Dacca did not at that time allow the latter.

James Wise tells a story about the Dacca Bhuinmali.<sup>41</sup> They were, they say, Sudras originally and were once invited along with all other castes to a feast given by the goddess Parvati. On seeing the goddess, a guileless Bhuinmali remarked: 'If I had such a beautiful woman in my house, I would cheerfully perform the most menial offices for her.' Siva overheard the remark, took the Bhuinmali up on his word, gave him a beautiful wife and made him her sweeper for life. A Dacca proverb makes the comment that the Bhuinmali is the only Hindu ever to be degraded for love of garbage.

Balaram Hadi, founder of the Balarami or Balahadi sect, was born in Meherpur in Nadia<sup>42</sup> sometime around 1780.<sup>43</sup> In his youth he was employed as a watchman at the house of the Malliks, the Vaidya zamindars of Meherpur. It is said that among the employees of the Malliks there were a number of Bhojpuri Brahmans who worked as guards and servants with whom Balaram spent a lot of his time, listening to recitations from Tulsidas's Ramayana and other devotional compositions. At this time there occurred one night a theft of some valuable jewellery with which the family deity of the Malliks was adorned. Balaram was suspected to have been involved in the crime and, by the order of his employer, was tied to a tree and

<sup>41</sup> James Wise, *Notices on the Races, Castes and Tribes of Eastern Bengal* (London, 1883), cited in ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Meherpur is now an *upajila* (sub-district) in Bangladesh.

<sup>43</sup> This account is based on the biographical details collected by Sudhir Chakrabarti, *Balahadi sampraday ar tader gan* (Calcutta, 1986). Unless otherwise indicated, all information on the sect and its songs are also from the same source. Dr Chakrabarti, of course, is not to be blamed for my interpretation of the material presented.

severely beaten. Mortified by this, Balaram left Meherpur and did not return to his village for the next twenty years or more. He is said to have wandered about in the company of religious men and when he came back to Meherpur to found his sect, he was fifty years old and a mendicant.

Balaram was illiterate but was credited with a quick wit and an unusual flair for the use of words. The Hadis, he used to say, did not have any of the taints with which the Brahmins had stigmatized them; just as the Gharami was one who built houses (*ghar*), so was the Hadi one who had created *had*—the bones with which all living beings are made. Akshaykumar Datta relates an apocryphal story which illustrates rather well Balaram's reputed facility with argumentation:

- Balaram had gone to bathe in the river, when he saw some Brahmins offering *tarpan* to their ancestors. Imitating their actions, he too began to throw water on to the river-bank. One of the Brahmins asked him, 'Balai, what do you think you are doing?' Balaram answered, 'I am watering my field of spinach.' The Brahman asked, 'Your field of spinach? Here?' Balaram replied, 'Well, your ancestors aren't here either. If you think that the water you pick up and throw back into the river reaches your ancestors, then why shouldn't the water I throw on the river-bank reach my fields?'<sup>44</sup>

Balaram emerged as a religious leader sometime in the 1830s. Writing in the 1890s, some three decades after Balaram's death, Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya reported that the sect had a following of about twenty thousand people.<sup>45</sup> Collective memory within the sect has it that at some point in his life as a preacher, Balaram was invited by one of his disciples to Nischintapur in the Tehatta area of Nadia (not far from the infamous fields of Plassey) where he set up another centre of activity. Sudhir Chakrabarti gives a list of twelve of his direct disciples, all of whom were low-caste (Muchi, Nam-sudra, Jugi, Hadi, Mahisyā and Muslim) and three were women de-

<sup>44</sup> Akshaykumar Datta, *Bharatvarsiya upasak-sampraday*, ed. Benoy Ghosh (Calcutta, 1969), pp. 137–9. Balaram's argument here resembles a much older form of *nastika* argumentation found in the so-called Carvaka philosophy. 'If those living in heaven can be nourished by the offerings of those living on earth, then why should not those living on the upper floor of a building be nourished by offerings made in the lower floor?' See *Carvaka-darsanam*, trans. (in Bengali) Panchanan Shastri (Calcutta, 1987), p. 87.

<sup>45</sup> J. N. Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects* (Calcutta, repr. 1973), pp. 388–9.

scribed as 'earning their livelihood by begging.'<sup>46</sup> Balaram also had a female companion, described variously as his wife or his *sevika* (attendant),<sup>47</sup> who later came to be known as Brahmamata. She was Malo by caste and ran the Meherpur centre after Balaram's death, while the Nischintapur centre was run by a Mahisya disciple called Tinu Mandal. Unlike the sahajiya Vaisnava sects, the Balaramis do not have a guru-disciple structure in their order: the various centres are run by leaders called sarkars, but the post is not necessarily hereditary. Until a few decades ago, there were about a dozen active centres in various villages in Nadia. At present, most are in a decrepit state, although a few centres survive in Burdwan, Bankura and Purulia where two or three large festivals are held every year.

Like many other religious leaders who have been invested with the attributes of divinity, Balaram too has been the subject of myths which give to the story of his birth an aura of extraordinariness. It is said that at the time of his father's wedding the astrologers had predicted that the son born of this marriage would be the last in the lineage. When the wife became pregnant she concealed the fact from everyone else. One afternoon a small child with a full growth of hair and beard suddenly dropped from the ceiling and, miraculously, the woman found her womb empty. She wrapped the child in a piece of cloth and quietly left it in the jungle. But she had a sister who lived in the next village. Balaram visited her in her dream. The next morning she came to the jungle and found the child lying under a tree, protected by two tigers. She took him away with her. The foster-mother found work in the house of a landlord, and when Balaram grew up to be a young boy he was employed to tend the landlord's cattle.

The birth was miraculous, and the story has a certain resemblance with that of the cowherd Krishna, brought up by his aunt in Vrindavan. One day the landlord Jiban Mukherjee was visited by his family guru and the boy Balaram was asked to accompany him to the river Bhairav where the guru was to bathe. It was here that the aforementioned conversation between Balaram and the Brahmins supposedly took place, and the story goes on to assert that Balaram did in fact perform the miracle of sending the river-water to a dis-

<sup>46</sup> *Balahadi sampraday*, pp. 27–8.

<sup>47</sup> Sudhir Chakrabarti thinks the latter is more probable, and that is certainly the version accepted by the sectarians. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

tant field. Greatly impressed by this feat, the Brahman guru came back and reprimanded his landlord disciple for employing a person with such miraculous powers as a mere servant. Balaram then asked that he be allowed to go back to the jungle from where he had come. Jiban Mukherjee donated a small piece of forest land to Balaram and it was there that he set up his *akhda*.<sup>48</sup>

Not all Brahmans, however, were quite so generous in acknowledging Balaram's spiritual merits. The Brahman landlord of Nischintapur, for instance, greatly resented Balaram's growing influence over his tenants. One afternoon, while Balaram was away, the landlord arranged to set fire to the Nischintapur *akhda*. When Balaram was told of this he remarked, 'He who sets fire to my house destroys his own.' Saying this, he left Nischintapur and in three long steps he was ten miles away in Meherpur. Apparently, it began to rain from that moment and it did not let up for the next nine days. Huge cracks appeared on the land surrounding the zamindar's barn-house, and by the time the rain stopped, the entire barn had been swallowed by an enormous crater. The place is now called the 'barnhouse lake'.

Balaram's teachings, not surprisingly, were directed against the Vedas, the ritual injunctions of the shastra and against the practices of caste. J. N. Bhattacharya, in his brief account of Balaram's sect, makes the remark: 'The most important feature of his cult was the hatred that he taught his followers to entertain towards Brahmans.'<sup>49</sup> He also forbade them to display any distinctive marks of their sect or, significantly, to utter the name of any god when

<sup>48</sup> This, according to Sudhir Chakrabarti, is confirmed by the land records at Meherpur where a gift of 0.35 acres of land from the landlord Jiban Mukherjee to Balaram Hadi is recorded. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> The meeting of this English-educated Brahman scholar with Brahmamata was not without a touch of irony. 'I met her in the year 1872. Her first question to me was about my caste. I knew well about the hatred of the sect towards Brahmans, and instead of mentioning that I was a Brahman, I used a pun to say that I was a human being. She was very much pleased, and after offering me a seat she went on propounding the tenets of her sect. The greater part of her utterances was meaningless jargon, but she talked fluently and with the dignity of a person accustomed to command. Though a Hari by caste, she did not hesitate to offer me her hospitality. I declined it as politely as I could but considering the courtesy that she showed to me, I could not but feel some regret that the barrier of caste rendered it quite impossible for me to comply with her request.' *Hindu Castes and Sects*, p. 389.

asking for alms. The mantras they were asked to chant were in plain Bengali, devoid even of the ornamental semblance of an *om* or a Tantric *brim klim slim*, and without the hint of an esoteric subtext. When Balaram died, his body was neither cremated, nor buried, nor thrown in the water: on his instructions, it was simply left in the jungle to be fed to other living creatures. For a few generations after Balaram, the sect leaders were buried after death or their bodies thrown into the river, but now the sastric procedure of cremation is generally followed.

The sectarian ideology of the Balahadis pitted itself not only against the dominant Brahmanical religion, it also demarcated itself from the religion of the Vaisnavas. Their songs refer with much derision to the practices of the *sahajiya*—their fondness for food, drink, sex and intoxicants, their obsession with counting the rosary, indeed their very existence as vagabonds without habitation or kin. They laugh at the Gaudiya dogma of complete servility of the devotee and retort: ‘Why should I stoop so low when Hadiram is within me?’ Ridiculing the concept of Chaitanya as the dual incarnation of Krishna and Radha, they ask, ‘If Chaitanya is Krishna, then why does he cry for him? If it is the Radha in him that cries, then Chaitanya is only half a being. Who is the complete being? Hadiram, of course. It is for him that Chaitanya cries, for Chaitanya can never find him. The perfect being appeared not in Nabadwip but in Meherpur.’<sup>50</sup>

The songs of the Balarami breathe the air of sectarianism. boastful, aggressive, often vain, they produce the impression of an open battle waged on many fronts. There is little that is secretive about the ways of the sect. Although its following consisted overwhelmingly of low-caste and poor labouring people, there is none of the esoteric practices associated with the *sahajiya* cults. Perhaps the absence of prosperous householders among them made it unnecessary for the Balaramis to conceal their defiance of the dominant norms—after all, who cared what a few Hadis or Malos proclaimed in their own little circles? As far as ‘respectable’ people were concerned, these untouchables were not particularly good religionists anyway—indeed, in a certain sense, incapable of good religion. It was their very marginality which may have taken the sting out of their revolt against subordination, and by asserting the unrelenting

<sup>50</sup> *Balahadi sampraday*, pp. 44–5, 49.

negativity and exclusiveness of their rebellious faith, they condemned themselves to eternal marginality.

### *The Genealogy of Insubordination*

But the defiance was not without conceit. It would be worth our while to delve into some of the mythic material with which the Balaramis constructed their faith in order to address the question we raised before: how do the contingencies of power determine the form and the outcome of rebellions against the dominance of a dharma which proclaims its universality?

Among the myths is a very curious and distinctive account of the origin of the species, which the Balaramis call their *jatitattva*. It seems that in the earliest age, the *adiyug*, there was nothing: this was, so to speak, time before creation. In the next, the *anadi yug*, was created plants. In the third age, the *dibya yug*, there was only Hadiram—and no one else. From his *hai* (yawn) was created Haimabati, the first female, and from her the first gods Brahma, Visnu and Siva who would direct the course of the sacred and profane histories in the *satya*, *treta*, *dvapar* and *kali* ages spoken of in the Puranas. This historical time of the four ages is described in the Balarami songs as a trap, a vicious snare that binds people to Vedic and Puranic injunctions. The quest for Hadiram is to find in one's mortal life the path of escape into that mythic time before history when the Hadi was noble, pure and worthy of respect.

The form of this creation myth is the same as that which occurs in most of the popular cult literature of Bengal, the archetypal form of which is to be found in the *Sunyapurana*.<sup>51</sup> There too we find an age before all ages when there is nothing and the supreme lord moves about in a vacuum. The lord then creates out of his compassion another personality called Niranjana, out of whose yawn is born the bird Uluka. From the lord's sweat is born Adyasakti, primordial energy in the form of a woman. From Adyasakti are born the three gods Brahma, Visnu and Siva. In the Balarami cosmogony, not only does Hadiram take the place of Niranjana but he seems to usurp the powers of the supreme lord as well.

Specifically, however, there is in the story of Haimabati's birth a more direct and yet curiously unacknowledged element of borrow-

<sup>51</sup> See Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, pp. 311–37.

ing. The literature of the Nath cults of northern and eastern Bengal tells the legend of how at the time of creation Siva came out of the mouth of the primordial lord, while out of the lord's *had* or bone was born Hadipa.<sup>52</sup> When Siva decided to take Gauri, the mother of the earth, as his wife and come down to earth, Hadipa, along with the other *siddha* Minanath, accompanied them as their attendants. Hadipa, however, expressed his willingness to accept even the occupation of a sweeper if he could have as wife a woman as beautiful as Gauri, and Siva ordained that he live on earth as a Hadi in the company of the queen Maynamati.<sup>53</sup> Hadipa was later to be celebrated in the Nath literature as the preceptor of the great *siddha* Gopichandra.

The similarity between this creation myth, hallowed in a much more well-known tradition in Bengal's folk literature and the one held by the Balaramis, strongly suggests that Balaram in fact picked it up in order to assert a sacred origin of the Hadi. It is also not surprising that a further transposition should be introduced into the Nath legend in order to give to Hadiram himself the status of the originator of the human species. What is remarkable, however, is that this source of the myth in a fairly well-established strand of popular religious tradition is entirely unacknowledged. There is nothing in the Balarami beliefs which claims any affiliation with the Nath religion, or with any other tradition of Saiva religious thought.

All that is conceded is a somewhat desultory recognition that of the three sons of Haimabati, Siva went a little further than his brothers Brahma and Visnu along the path of worship that led to Hadiram. For it is said that Mahadeva alone had an inkling of the tattva of Hadiram: he counted all of the 108 bones created by the latter and still wanders about, wearing a necklace of bones around his neck and singing the praises of Hadiram.<sup>54</sup> Of the other two sons of Haimabati we get, in the third generation in the line of Brahma's eldest daughter Ghamkanchani,<sup>55</sup> two brothers called Ajir

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 211–55, 367–98.

<sup>53</sup> This is undoubtedly the source of the story picked up by James Wise about the origin of the Bhuinmali.

<sup>54</sup> Here again is an element of commonality with the *Sunyapurana* cosmogony, for there too it is Siva alone of the three sons of Adyasakti who is able to recognize the supreme lord in disguise.

<sup>55</sup> *Gham* = sweat. In the *Sunyapurana* myths, the first female Adyasakti is born from the sweat of the lord, but the relation here has been transposed to the progeny of Brahma.

Methar and Bhusi Ghosh, the Methar being a sub-caste of the Hadi but the most degraded among them, while by Ghosh is probably meant the Goala caste which is a 'touchable' Sudra caste, higher in status than both the Methar and the Hadi. Visnu's section is more colourful, for in the line of his second daughter Muchundari Kali we get Haoya and Adam of whom are born two sons Habel and Kabel. Undoubtedly, we have here the Old Testament story of the genesis as retold in the Koran—that is, Hawwa (Eve) and Adam and their sons Habil (Abel) and Qabil (Cain)—slotted in the fourth and fifth generations of the human species. In Habel's line, we then get four jatis—Sheikh, Saiyad, Mughal and Pathan, the four traditional classificatory groups among Indian Muslims, and in Kabel's line we get Nikiri, Jola (low-status Muslim fishermen and weaver castes) and, believe it or not, Rajput.<sup>56</sup> Of Visnu's third child, Musuk Kali, are born three sons. The eldest, Parasar, is a sage and he gives birth to eleven children, namely, goat, tiger, snake, vulture, mouse, mosquito, elephant, horse, cat, camel and monkey! The youngest son, Risav, is also a *muni* and from his grandsons originate thirteen Brahman groups, whose names are Dobe, Chobe, Pathak, Pande, Teoyari, Misir, etc.—most recognizable names here are those of Bihar and UP Brahmans and none are Bengali names. (Perhaps we ought to recall Balaram's early association with Bhojpuri Brahmans in the house of his landlord employer.) The Bengali Brahmans originate in a particularly degraded section, for Pathak had two children, Vrisha (bull) and Mesha (sheep), one born of an untouchable Bede woman and the other of an untouchable Bagdi woman. From them originate all the Brahman lineages of Bengal, such as Bhatije, Badije, Mukhuje, Gangal, Ghusal, Bagji, Lahadi, Bhadariya, etc.

There is much more in this extraordinary genealogical tree whose meanings are not transparent to the uninitiated; even the present-day leaders of the cult cannot explain many of the references. The ramifications of Balaram's jatitattva, in as much as it attempts to define a new set of relations between various existent social groups, are for the most part unclear. What is clear, however, is first that the scheme continues to undertake the classification of social groups in

<sup>56</sup> Actually, the classification of jatis in Habel's line is elaborated still further and includes divisions such as Shia and Sunni among the Mughals, or Sur, Surani, Lodi and Lohani among Pathans. Habel's line seems to comprise groups that claim an aristocratic Muslim lineage, while Kabel's is definitely of inferior social status, although the inclusion of Rajputs in the latter line remains a complete mystery.

terms of a natural division into species, and it does this to a great extent by transforming the relations between elements within a popularly inherited mythic code, and second that by overturning the hierarchical order of the Puranic creation myths it pushes the very ideality of the dominant scheme of caste to a limit where it merges with its opposite. Balaram's jatitattva does not assert that there are no jatis or no differences between social groups akin to the differences between natural species. Rather, by raising the Hadi to the position of the purest of the pure, the self-determining originator of differentiations within the genus, and by reducing the Brahman to a particularly impure and degenerate lineage, it subverts the very claim of the dominant dharma that the actual social relations of caste are in perfect conformity with its universal ideality.

Without, of course, asserting a new universal. That is a mark imprinted on consciousness of the yet unsurpassed limit of the condition of subalternity. The conceit shown in the construction of Balaram's jatitattva is a sign of conscious insubordination. But there is no trace in it of a self-conscious contest for an alternative social order. Or are we being too hasty in our judgement?

### *The Body as the Site of Appropriation*

Caste attaches to the body, not to the soul. It is the biological reproduction of the human species through procreation within endogamous caste groups which ensures the permanence of ascribed marks of caste purity or pollution. It is also the physical contact of the body with defiling substances or defiled bodies that mark it with the temporary conditions of pollution which can be removed by observing the prescribed procedures of physical cleansing. Further, if we have grasped the essence of caste, it is the necessity to protect the purity of his body that forbids the Brahman from engaging in acts of labour which involve contact with polluting material, and which, reciprocally, requires the unclean castes to perform those services for the Brahman. The essence of caste, we may then say, requires that the labouring bodies of the impure castes be reproduced in order that they can be subordinated to the need to maintain the bodies of the pure castes in their state of purity. All the injunctions of dharma must work to this end.

When popular religious cults deviate from the dogma of the dominant religion, when they announce the rejection of the Vedas,

the sastric rituals or caste, they declare a revolt of the spirit. But the conditions of power which make such revolts possible are not necessarily the same as those that would permit a practical insubordination of labouring bodies. To question the ideality of caste is not directly to defy its immediate reality.

It is not as though this other battle has not been waged. Let us leave aside those high points of popular protest which take the explicit political forms of insurgency: these have received a fair amount of attention from historians, their general features have been examined and their historical limits broadly delineated. We are also not considering here those particular or individual instances of disobedience, whether demonstrative or covert, which undoubtedly occur in the daily life of every village in India. Instead, let us turn our eyes to the practical aspects of the religious life of the deviant cults we have been talking about. All of these are fundamentally concerned with the body. The sahajiya cults, we have noticed, practise the forms of bodily worship which do not respect the dicta of either the shastra or the shariat. But they can only be conducted in secret, under the guidance of the guru, and their principles can be propagated only in the language of enigma. Where they seek an open congregation, it takes the anti-structural form of the *communitas* of periodic and momentary religious festivals. And yet there is, underlying it all, the attempt to define a claim of proprietorship over one's own body, to negate the daily submission of one's body and its labour to the demands made by the dominant dharma and to assert a domain of bodily activity where it can, with the full force of ethical conviction, disregard those demands. Notice, therefore, the repeated depiction of the body in the songs of *dehatattva* not simply as a material entity, but as an artefact—not a natural being at all, but a physical construct. The body is a house, or a boat, or a cart, or a weaver's loom, or a potter's wheel, or any of countless other instruments or products of labour which remain at the disposal and use of one who possesses them. But the very secretiveness of these cult practices, the fact that they can be engaged in only, as it were, outside the boundaries of the social structure, sets the limit to the practical effectiveness of the claim of possession; not surprisingly, it draws upon itself the charge of licentiousness.

The practical religion of the Balahadis takes a different form. Their sectarianism is not, as we have seen, secretive, nor is it primarily conceived as a set of practices engaged in beyond the margins

of social life. Rather, their forms of worship involve a self-disciplining of the body in the course of one's daily social living. Here too the body is an artefact, but it can be used by its owner with skill and wisdom or wasted and destroyed by profligacy. The specific forms of self-discipline, as far as one can gather from the material supplied by Sudhir Chakrabarti, again seem to bear close resemblance with the *hathayoga* practices of the Nath cults. The main principle is that of *ultasadhana* which involves yogic exercises that produce a regressive or upward movement in the bodily processes. It is believed that in the normal course the force of *pravritti* or activity and change moves in a downward direction, taking the body along the path of decay and destruction. The aim of self-discipline is to reverse this process by moving it in the upward direction of *nivrtti* or rest. More specifically, the bodily practices involve the retention of the *bindu* or *sukra* (semen) and preventing its waste. The Balahadi literature does not, of course, prescribe the full range of *hathayoga* practices, which can only be performed in strict celibacy, with a view to reaching the perfect *siddha* state of immortality.<sup>57</sup> What it does, however, is lay down a sort of new *asramadharma* for its adherents—a graded series of states of bodily discipline that can be attempted in the course of a mortal, and social, life.

The lowest state is that of *bodhitan* where the body is completely a prisoner of impulses and base desires. It is a state where one does not even will an escape from the debilitating demands of the 'four ages'—that snare of historical time in which all the forces of activity and change work towards the bondage and annihilation of free life. To us, this appears to be a state characterized by the mindless pursuit of instant pleasure, although the Balarami would put this as its opposite. The body, he would say, is here completely under the sway of *man*, i.e. of mind which is the storehouse of impulse and desire. In *bodhitan*, the body is not its own; it is the state of alienation of the body from itself. Indeed, this bodily state becomes the representation of that condition of the labouring classes which provokes such remarks as 'The Hadi's Lakshmi finds her way into the Sundi's [liquor-seller's] house.'<sup>58</sup> The passage of the body from this

<sup>57</sup> This may be a good reason why it does not claim any allegiance to the religion of the Nath siddhas. However, the stories about Balaram's own miraculous powers of transportation indicate a claim of considerable facility in *hathayoga* skills.

<sup>58</sup> 'Hadir lakshmi sundir ghare yay.' Sushilkumar De, *Bamla prabab*, p. 224.

state to that of *eyotan* is the crucial transition for a Balarami householder. In *eyotan*, the bodily processes are under the control of its owner. The semen is preserved and spent only for procreation.<sup>59</sup> This, in this world of representations where the body stands as microcosm for the universe, is the daily affirmation of a proprietorship constantly threatened. If the purity and perfection of the body can be controlled from within itself, nothing external can pollute it. For most lay followers of the sect, this is as far as their *sadhan* is expected to go. For the fortunate few, a successful life in *eyotan* is followed by the state of *nityan* where there is complete unconcern for the world. This is a stage of life spent outside the bonds of family and kin. The final and most perfect state of *sadhan* is that of *khastan*. It is a state of complete freedom and hence of unconditioned proprietorship over one's bodily existence, for, as the Balaramis say, the *praja* of *khastan* are entities such as light, air, sky, fire or water which do not pay a rent to anyone for their earthly existence. This is a state which only Balaram was able to attain.

What are we to say of this? There are unmistakable signs here of a consciousness alienated from the dominant dharma, but apparently bound to nothing else than its spirit of resolute negativity. Its practical defeat too is borne out by the facts of social history. Yet, is there not here an implicit, barely stated, search for a recognition whose signs lie not outside, but within one's own self? Can one see here the trace of an identity which is defined not by others, but by oneself? Perhaps we have allowed ourselves to be taken in too easily by the general presence of an abstract negativity in the autonomous domain of subaltern beliefs and practices and have missed those marks, faint as they are, of an immanent process of criticism and learning, of selective appropriation, of making sense of and using on one's own terms the elements of a more powerful cultural order. We must, after all, remind ourselves that subaltern consciousness is not merely structure, characterized solely by negativity; it is also history, shaped and developed through a changing process of interaction between the dominant and the subordinate. Surely it would be

<sup>59</sup> Once a month, before sunrise on the fourth day after the end of the wife's menstrual cycle. It will also be evident that the attempt to claim proprietorship over one's own body is an exclusively male enterprise. Woman is in fact the embodiment of external pravritti which tempts, subjugates and destroys the male body. This raises a very crucial question about the relationship of subaltern consciousness to gender, a matter which unfortunately has received little serious attention.

wholly contrary to our project to go about as though only the dominant culture has a life in history and subaltern consciousness eternally frozen in its structure of negation.

### *The Implicit and the Explicit*

We must, however, be careful in avoiding the easy, mechanical, transposition of the specifics of European history. The specific forms of immanent development necessarily work with a definite cultural content. It seems quite far-fetched to identify in the criticisms of caste among the deviant religions the embryo of a Protestant ethic or an incipient urge for bourgeois freedom. What we have is a desire for a structure of community in which the opposite tendencies of mutual separateness and mutual dependence are united by a force that has a greater universal moral actuality than the given forms of the dominant dharma. For want of a more concrete concept of praxis, we may call this desire, in an admittedly abstract and undifferentiated sense, a desire for democratization, where rights and the application of the norms of justice are open to a broader basis of consultation, disputation and resolution.

Every social form of the community, in the formal sense, must achieve the unity of mutual separateness and mutual dependence of its parts. The system of castes, we have seen, makes this claim, but its actuality is necessarily in disjunction with its ideality. The external critique of caste, drawn from the liberal ideology of Europe, suggests that a legal framework of bourgeois freedom and equality provides an alternative and in principle more democratic basis for this unification. This has been the formal basis of the constitutional structure of the post-colonial state in India. And yet the practical construction of this new edifice out of the given cultural material has been forced into an abandonment of its principles from the very start—notice, for instance, the provisions of special reservations on grounds of caste.<sup>60</sup> The new political processes have, it would seem, managed to effect a displacement of the unifying force of dharma but replaced it with the unifying concept of ‘nation’ as concretely embodied in the state. What has resulted is not the actualization of bourgeois equality at all, but rather the conflicting claims of caste

<sup>60</sup> For an account of the legal muddle on this question, see Marc Galanter, *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India* (Delhi, 1984).

groups (to confine ourselves to this particular domain of social conflict), not on the religious basis of dharma, but on the purely secular demands of claims upon the state. The force of dharma, it appears, has been ousted from its position of superiority, to be replaced with a vengeance by the pursuit of artha, but, *pace* Dumont, on the basis again of caste divisions. On the one hand, we have the establishment of capitalist relations in agricultural production in which the new forms of wage labour fit snugly into the old grid of caste divisions.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, we have the supremely paradoxical phenomenon of low-caste groups asserting their very backwardness in the caste hierarchy to claim discriminatory privileges from the state, and upper-caste groups proclaiming the sanctity of bourgeois equality and freedom (the criterion of equal opportunity mediated by skill and merit) in order to beat back the threat to their existing privileges. What are we to make of these conflicting desires for democratization?

There is no alternative for us but to undertake a search, both theoretical and practical, for the concrete forms of democratic community which are based neither on the principles of hierarchy nor on those of bourgeois equality. The posure by Dumont of the principles of *homo hierarchicus* against those of *homo equalis* is a false, essentialist, positing of an unresolvable antinomy. We must assert that there is a more developed universal form of the unity of separateness and dependence which subsumes hierarchy and equality as lower historical moments.

The point is to explicate the principles and to construct the concrete forms of this universal. In Indian politics the problem of unifying the opposed requirements of separateness and dependence has been concretely addressed only at the level of the structure of federalism, a level where the problem is seen as permitting a territorial resolution. The attempt has had dubious success. In other domains, of which caste is a prime example, politics has drifted from one contentious principle to another (bourgeois equality, caste-class correlation, discriminatory privileges for low castes through state intervention, etc.) without finding adequate ground on which it can be superseded by a new universal form of community.

But, and this has been my argument in this essay, there does exist

<sup>61</sup> Numerous recent studies have shown this. See, for example, John Harriss, *Capitalism and Peasant Farming: Agrarian Structure and Ideology in Northern Tamil Nadu* (Delhi, 1982).

a level of social life where labouring people in their practical activity have constantly sought in their 'common sense' the forms, mediated by culture, of such community. The problem of politics is to develop and make explicit what is only implicit in popular activity, to give to its process of mediation the conditions of sufficiency. The point, in other words, is to undertake a criticism of 'common sense' on the basis of 'common sense'; not to inject into popular life a 'scientific' form of thought springing somewhere else, but to develop and make critical an activity which already exists in popular life.

*Postscript*

It was Hitesranjan Sanyal who first introduced me to the intricacies of caste and popular religion in Bengal, and after arguing with him for many long hours over my earlier drafts of this essay I was happy when he acknowledged that I had a point. It comes as a great shock to me, as this goes to press, to be only able to record in public my intellectual debt to him, which is greater than he ever knew. I dedicate this essay to his memory.

# Dominance Without Hegemony And Its Historiography

RANAJIT GUHA

## I. CONDITIONS FOR A CRITIQUE OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

### *An Agreement between Rivals*

There was one Indian battle that Britain never won. It was a battle for appropriation of the Indian past. It began with the East India Company's accession to *diwani* in 1765. The duties of that office required that its incumbent should know the structure of landed property in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa well enough to be able to collect the revenues on behalf of the nawab. But since the intricacies of proprietorship could hardly be understood without a grasp of the relations of power which had accumulated to it over time, the diwan had to undertake the function of the historian as well. Consequently, many of the local histories to be written in English during these early days had the concerns of a hard-pressed but still rather inexperienced bureaucracy branded on them. Meant primarily to help the administration to determine inheritance along the lines of descent within the leading landlord families of a district, these are among the first specimens of elitist bias in British Indian historiography.

A bias of that order was clearly expressed in the assumption that the local aristocracies were the 'natural proprietors' of land in India. Based entirely on contemporary Whig doctrines about law and society in Britain, that assumption was soon to be dressed up as a fact of Indian history and used as an argument in favour of a zamindari settlement. The past acquired its depth in these accounts from elaborately constructed genealogies going back to (an often mythical) antiquity in some cases and from (genuine or fabricated) Mughal charters as evidence of proprietary right. This had the effect of

conferring a sense of spurious continuity on what was a total rupture brought about by the intervention of an European power in the structure of landed property in South Asia. The illusion of continuity was reinforced further by global histories which drew copiously on medieval chronicles in order to situate the British dominion in a line of conquests that had begun with the Turko-Afghans and in a tradition that allowed the conquerors to extract tribute from the conquered.

Thus these preliminary exercises in colonialist historiography, whether done on a local or a global scale, abetted directly in laying the foundations of the raj. Nothing illustrates this better than the way the Indian past was mobilized by all the contending parties in the debates within the Company's administration during the last three decades of the eighteenth century. The history of the subject population was reconstructed there over and over again as the central question of the relation of property to empire became the subject of controversies between Hastings and Francis in the 1770s, between Grant and Shore in the 1780s, and between Shore and Cornwallis in 1788–92 on the eve of the Permanent Settlement. The outcome of such attempts at appropriation was to provide legal and administrative support for those measures which set up British rule in the subcontinent eventually as a rule of property.

This rudimentary historiography was soon followed up by a more mature and sophisticated discourse when the time came for the growing colonial state, already secure in its control of the wealth of the land, to reinforce its apparatus of ideological control. All the energies and skills of nineteenth-century British scholarship were harnessed to this project. It investigated, recorded and wrote up the Indian past in a vast corpus which, worked by many hands during the seventy years between Mill's *History of British India* (1812) and Hunter's *Indian Empire* (1881), came to constitute an entirely new kind of knowledge. A colonialist knowledge, its function was to erect that past as a pedestal on which the triumphs and glories of the colonizers and their instrument, the colonial state, could be displayed to best advantage. Indian history, assimilated thereby to the history of Great Britain, would henceforth be used as a comprehensive measure of difference between the peoples of these two countries. Politically that difference was spelt out as one between rulers and the ruled; ethnically between a white *Herrenvolk* and blacks; materially between a prosperous Western power and its poor Asian

subjects; culturally between higher and lower levels of civilization, between the superior religion of Christianity and indigenous belief systems made up of superstition and barbarism—all adding up to an irreconcilable difference between colonizer and colonized. The Indian past was thus painted red.

However, the appropriation of a past by conquest carries with it the risk of rebounding upon the conquerors. It can end up by sacralizing the past for the subject people and encouraging them to use it in their effort to define and affirm their own identity. This, no doubt, was what happened in the instance under discussion, and the appropriated past came to serve as the sign of the Other not only for the colonizers, but ironically for the colonized as well. The latter, in their turn, reconstructed their past for purposes opposed to those of their rulers and made it the ground for marking out their differences in cultural and political terms. History became thus a game for two to play as the alien colonialist project of appropriation was matched by an indigenous nationalist project of counter-appropriation.

The two have been locked in an indecisive battle ever since. The contradictions of colonialism which have inspired this contest in the first place lingered on at the ideological level even after their resolution, in constitutional terms, by the Transfer of Power. The cultural regime of colonialism clearly outlived the raj in the study of the Indian past, as was obvious from the considerable influence which continued to be exerted on it by the more recent avatars of colonialist historiography. What made it possible, indeed necessary, for that influence to persist was a fundamental agreement between the Indian bourgeoisie and the British whom they replaced as rulers about the nature of colonialism itself—that is, what it was and what constituted its power relations. Both proceeded from the standpoint of liberalism to regard the colonial state as an organic extension of the metropolitan bourgeois state and colonialism as an adaptation, if not quite a replication, of the classical bourgeois culture of the West in English rendering. Generally speaking, that phenomenon was regarded by both as a positive confirmation of the universalizing tendency of capital—a point to which we shall soon return.

The rivalries of the two bourgeoisies and their representations in colonialist and nationalist discourses did little to diminish the importance of this essential agreement. On the contrary, all the trans-

actions between the two parties which made up the stuff of elite politics followed from an understanding to abide by a common set of rules based on the British constitutionalist, parliamentary model. It was a matter of playing cricket. If a nationalist agitation ran into difficulty, the bureaucracy would gloat over the fact that Gandhi was on a poor wicket, and he would, when outraged by particularly vicious acts of official violence, condemn the administration as 'un-British'. Neither side appears to have realized the absurdity of accusing each other of deviating from norms which were displayed as ideals but prevented in fact from realizing themselves to any significant extent at all in the dominant idioms of political practice. This incomprehension, so symptomatic of the malaise of a liberalism grafted on to colonial conditions, informed historical discourses corresponding to both the points of view and underscored their common failure to discern the anomalies that made colonialism into a figure of paradox.

The paradox consists of the fact that the performance of the elite groups, whose careers have provided both these historiographies with their principal themes, was widely at variance with their historic competence. Thus, the metropolitan bourgeoisie who professed and practised democracy at home were happy to conduct the government of their Indian empire as an autocracy. Champions of the right of the European nations to self-determination, they denied the same right to their Indian subjects until the very last phase of the raj and granted it without grace only when forced to do so under the impact of the anti-imperialist struggles of the subject population. Their antagonism to feudal values and institutions in their own society made little difference (in spite of the much publicized though somewhat ineffective campaigns against *sati*, child marriage, etc) to their vast tolerance of pre-capitalist values and institutions in Indian society.

Their opposite numbers, the indigenous bourgeoisie, spawned and nurtured by colonialism itself, adopted a role that was distinguished by its failure to measure up to the heroism of the European bourgeoisie in its period of ascendancy. Pliant and prone to compromise from their inception, they lived in a state of happy accommodation with imperialism for the greater part of their career as a constituted political force between 1885 and 1947. The destruction of the colonial state was never a part of their project. They abjured and indeed resolutely opposed all forms of armed struggle against the

raj, and settled for pressure politics as their main tactical means in bargaining for power. Compromise and accommodation were equally characteristic of their attitude to the semi-feudal values and institutions entrenched in Indian society. The liberalism they professed was never strong enough to exceed the limitations of the half-hearted initiatives for reform which issued from the colonial administration. This mediocre liberalism, a caricature of the vigorous democratic culture of the epoch of the rise of the bourgeoisie in the West, operated throughout the colonial period in a symbiotic relationship with the still active and vigorous forces of the semi-feudal culture of India.

How come that liberal historiography of both kinds fails to take notice of these paradoxes? Why is it that on those infrequent occasions when it does take notice it still makes no serious attempt to 'explain them? Why, on the contrary, is the discrepancy between competence and performance in the record of the metropolitan bourgeoisie trivialized so often by liberal-imperialism and its scribes merely as an unrepresentative instance of malfunctioning in the administrative apparatus of the raj? Why does liberal-nationalism, in its turn, tend to account for discrepancies of the same order in the record of the indigenous bourgeoisie simply as local difficulties generated by survivals of a pre-capitalist culture and destined to be overcome by the leaders of the nation on their march to progress? How is it that no real effort is ever made by historians on either side to link these paradoxes to any structural fault in the historic project of the bourgeoisie?

#### *Containment of Historiography in Dominant Culture*

None of these questions can be answered without dispelling, first of all, the myth of ideological neutrality which is central to liberal historiography. For it is not possible to write or speak about the past without the use of concepts and presuppositions derived from one's experience and understanding of the present, that is, from those ideas by which the writer or speaker interprets his own times to himself and to others. As Hayden White has observed:

There does, in fact, appear to be an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality ... the very claim to have discerned some kind of formal coherence in the historical record brings with it theories of the nature of the historical world and of historical knowledge itself which have ideological implications for attempts to understand 'the

'present', however this 'present' is defined. To put it another way, the very claim to have distinguished a past from a present world of social thought and praxis, and to have determined the formal coherence of that past world, implies a conception of the form that knowledge of the present world also must take, insofar as it is *continuous* with that past world. Commitment to a particular *form* of knowledge predetermines the *kinds* of generalizations one can make about the present world, the kinds of knowledge one can have of it, and hence the kinds of projects one can legitimately conceive for changing that present or for maintaining it in its present form indefinitely.

The ideological dimensions of a historical account reflect the ethical element in the historian's assumption of a particular position on the question of the nature of historical knowledge and the implications that can be drawn from the study of past events for the understanding of present ones. By the term 'ideology' I mean a set of prescriptions for taking a position in the present world of social praxis and acting upon it (either to change the world or to maintain it in its current state).<sup>1</sup>

To change the world and to maintain it in its current state have indeed been the dual functions of liberal historiography performed on behalf of the class for which it speaks. A bourgeois discourse par excellence, it helped the bourgeoisie to change or at least significantly to modify the world according to its class interests in the period of its ascendancy, and since then to consolidate and perpetuate its dominance. As such, this historiography may be said not only to share, but actively to propagate, all the fundamental ideas by which the bourgeoisie represents and explains the world both as it is and as it was. The function of this complicity is, in short, *to make liberal historiography speak from within the bourgeois consciousness itself*.

To commit a discourse to speak from within a given consciousness is to disarm it insofar as its critical faculty is made inoperative thereby with regard to that particular consciousness. For no criticism can be fully activated unless its object is distanced from its agency. This is why liberal historiography, cramped as it is within the bourgeois consciousness, can never attack the latter vigorously enough as the object of its criticism. Since the paradoxes characteristic of the political culture of colonialism testify to the failure of the bourgeoisie to acknowledge the structural limitations of bourgeois dominance itself, it is hardly surprising that the liberal historical discourse too should be blind to those paradoxes. This is a necessary,

<sup>1</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore & London, 1983), pp. 21–2.

one could say congenital, blindness which this historiography acquires by virtue of its class origin.

However, such blindness is by no means limited to bourgeois discourse alone. The knowledge systems that make up *any* dominant culture are all contained within the dominant consciousness and have therefore the latter's deficiencies built into their optics. The light of criticism emitted by such systems can, under no circumstances, be strong enough to penetrate and scan some of the strategic areas of that consciousness where dominance stores the spiritual gear it needs to justify and sustain itself.

It is notorious, for instance, that the historic cultures of the European Antiquity, those of Greece in the fifth and fourth centuries BC and of Rome during a period of four hundred years until the second century AD, were not merely tolerant but positively supportive of slavery. Aristotle justified slavery both in psychological and institutional terms when he observed in *The Politics* 'that by nature some are free, others slaves, and that for these it is both right and expedient that they should serve as slaves'.<sup>2</sup> Herodotus, the historian, too, believed, according to Finley, 'that—barring the inevitable exceptions—slaves as a class were inferior beings, inferior in their psychology, by their nature'.<sup>3</sup> And yet another historian, Xenophon, was the author, we are told, of a plan to set up a state fund of public slaves large enough to provide three of them for every Athenian citizen.<sup>4</sup>

It was thus that a dominant culture spoke up for a dominance based on the exploitation of slaves. There is no critical distance separating the intellectual here from the ruler in his understanding of the basic power relations of a slave society. On the contrary, the knowledge philosophers and historians had of slavery was clearly a component of the same consciousness that made the slave-owner knowledgeable about his slaves. Together, the two knowledges constituted the polar ends of an epistemological system in which, as Anderson has so incisively remarked, an ideal of absolute juridical freedom and that of absolute unfreedom came to form a dyad and

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics* (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (Harmondsworth, 1983), p. 119.

<sup>4</sup> Perry Anderson, *Passage from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London, 1975), p. 23.

provide an 'ideological correlate' for the material prosperity generated by a slave mode of production.<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising therefore that the historiography which was itself an instance of this ideological correlate was unable to break away from its moorings in slavery and adopt a critical stance towards the latter.

Feudal historiography, too, was identified with the ruling culture and situated snugly within the relations of dominance and subordination specific to feudal society. Hence the voice of the historian in such a society was often indistinguishable from that of the panegyrist, the courtier and the apologist speaking for gods, kings and noblemen. The historical discourse was indeed so completely integrated here in the discourse of power that the fundamental aspects of the authority structure were never questioned even by the most questioning of writers. One such distinguished writer was Kalhaṇa, the author of the *Rājataranginī*, the twelfth-century chronicle of Kashmir.

It is generally agreed that Kalhaṇa was outstanding, indeed exceptional, in his critical acumen among the historians of the pre-Sultanate period of medieval India. The range of his source material and the sophistication with which he used it have evoked the admiration and to some extent amazement of modern scholars.<sup>6</sup> His evidence included not only the information he gathered from some of the older chronicles and *purāṇas*, but also a good deal of oral tradition. To these he added, anticipating the historian's craft of later times, a reading of epigraphic and numismatic data. On that basis he proceeded to scrutinize as many as eleven royal chronicles written before his time and challenged effectively the work of the prestigious eleventh-century author Kshemendra by identifying some gross inaccuracies in his 'List of Kings'. By such a procedure, he claimed, 'all wearisome error has been set at rest'.<sup>7</sup>

What is even more important for the present discussion is that he was centuries ahead of his own age in attributing the function of a

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, R. C. Majumdar, 'Ideas of History in Sanskrit Literature', and A. L. Basham, 'The Kashmir Chronicle'—both in C. H. Philips (ed.), *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon* (London, 1961).

<sup>7</sup> *Rājataranginī*, translated by Ranjit Sitaram Pandit (Sahitya Akademi edition: New Delhi, 1968), 1:13–15.

judge to his ideal historian. ‘That man of merit alone deserves praise’, he wrote, ‘whose language, like that of a judge, in recounting the events of the past has discarded bias as well as prejudice.’<sup>8</sup> This was an amazingly high standard for a medieval annalist to set for himself. There was nothing in the material and spiritual conditions of twelfth-century Kashmir, a feudal state racked, according to Kosambi, by ‘a war of extermination’ between kings and barons (*Dāmaras*), to enable historical discourse to speak with judicial impartiality about royalty and aristocracy.<sup>9</sup> For a feudal culture which had no use for genuine social criticism left the historian with no choice other than bias or prejudice in writing about the elite groups—bias in favour of those who offered patronage and prejudice towards those who were opposed to his patrons.

It is all the more remarkable therefore that Kalhaṇa’s historiographical practice should have approximated his ideal to a certain degree. Neither Lalitāditya Muktāpiḍa, a king he admired in many respects, nor Harsha, his father’s patron, were spared his criticism.<sup>10</sup> And even though his impartiality seems to have been strained to the utmost in his account of the reign of Jayasimha, the ruling prince, he did not pass over the latter’s misdeeds in silence.<sup>11</sup> The faint praise addressed to the monarch fell appreciably short of the conventional *prāśasti*, the panegyric composed by a court poet—and the chronicle was written as a *kāvya*—for his patron as an obligatory feudal due. All this is no mean achievement for a medieval chronicler, and it has led Majumdar to credit Kalhaṇa with ‘the supreme merit of possessing a critical mind and that spirit of scepticism which is the first virtue of a historian’.<sup>12</sup>

But how far does this scepticism go, how deep is the thrust of this critical mind? Judging by what Majumdar himself has to say about Kalhaṇa’s ‘belief in witchcraft and magic feats, occasional explanation of events as due to the influence of fate or wrath of gods rather than to any rational cause, and a general didactic tendency inspired by Hindu views of doctrines of *karma* and transmigration’,<sup>13</sup> it is clear that criticism was confined within the bounds of a feudal con-

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 1:7.

<sup>9</sup> D. D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (second edition; Bombay, 1975), p. 365.

<sup>10</sup> Majumdar, p. 23; Basham, p. 62. <sup>11</sup> Basham, pp. 62–3.

<sup>12</sup> Majumdar, p. 21. <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

sciousness even in this outstanding instance of a historical discourse which had set out so bravely to try 'in this narrative of past events to repair by all means where there is error'.<sup>14</sup> Since the error was branded on the body of the dominant consciousness itself, historiography, unable to jump out of its skin, was forced to work from within the ruling culture.

The verse with which Kalhaṇa concludes his account of the murderous rule of Mihirakula may be cited here as one of many possible illustrations of such containment. 'Thus although wicked', it reads, 'that the king had not been assassinated by the people in an uprising, was because he was protected by the very gods who had urged him to do that act'.<sup>15</sup> In an age when *rājbhakti* was a principal component of political philosophy, the historian seems to have relied in equal degrees on his own doubts about the record of the Kashmir rulers and on the experience of frequent baronial revolts to ask why there were no popular uprisings and no regicide. But the question fails to explode. Its sceptical charge is neutralized by a dominant ideology according to which the destiny of kings and kingdoms is governed not by the will of the people but by that of the gods. It is precisely such critical failure—the failure of criticism to exceed the limits of its conceptual universe—that, in the event, reduces Kalhaṇa with all his questioning into an apologist for the feudal polity of his times. Basham is by no means unduly harsh in his judgement when he observes that 'In fact the *Rājatarangīni* is in part a work of political propaganda, written for the purpose of persuading the ruling classes of Kashmir to put their house in order'.<sup>16</sup> The author himself came close to assigning such a role to his *kathā* when, at the very beginning of the chronicle, he defined its function as that of entertaining and instructing his royal readership.<sup>17</sup> A witness to the internecine strife of the elite which was undermining the very foundation of authority in this feudal state, the historian, with all his scepticism, managed after all to secure a comfortable place for his discourse within the ruling ideology. Or, to phrase it according to the taxonomy of ancient Indian knowledge systems, one could say that *Itihāsa* had become an accomplice here to *Arthaśāstra*.

<sup>14</sup> *Rājatarangīni*, I: 9–10.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., I: 324.      <sup>16</sup> Basham, p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> *Rājatarangīni*, I:21. For a discussion of the errors in Buhler's reading of this verse and its correct interpretation, see the translator's note in ibid., pp. 7–9, and Majumdar, p. 21.

### *Where Does Criticism Come From?*

All of this goes to show that no discourse can oppose a genuinely uncompromising critique to a ruling culture so long as its ideological parameters are the same as those of that very culture. Where then does criticism come from? *From outside the universe of dominance which provides the critique with its object, indeed from another and historically antagonistic universe*, as should be evident even from a cursory look at the criticism that has been addressed to the slave-owning and feudal discourses mentioned above. Consider, for instance, two classic comments on Aristotle's justification of slavery. One of these comes from Montesquieu as he writes in *De l'Esprit des Lois* (1748):<sup>18</sup>

- Aristote veut prouver qu'il y a des esclaves par nature, et ce qu'il dit ne le preuve guere ... Mais, comme tous les hommes naissent égaux, il faut dire que l'esclavage est contre la nature ... (L.XIV, ch. VII)

A little later in the same work he denounces helotry in almost identical terms: 'cette îlotie est contre la nature des choses' (L.XIV, Ch.x). It is illuminating for our purpose to read this together with Hegel's observations on the same subject in the Second Draft (1830) of his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History—Introduction: Reason in History*. Thus:

The consciousness of freedom first awoke among the Greeks, and they were accordingly free; but, like the Romans, they only knew that Some, and not all men as such, are free. Plato and Aristotle did not know this either; thus the Greeks not only had slaves, on which their life and the continued existence of their esteemable freedom depended, but their very freedom itself was on the one hand only a fortuitous, undeveloped, transient and limited efflorescence, and on the other, a harsh servitude of all that is humane and proper to man.<sup>19</sup>

In these two texts, both eminently representative of the ideology of the bourgeoisie in the period of its ascendancy in Western Europe, the critique of slavery proceeds from ideas which were clearly hostile to concepts and values that made up the slave-owner's attitude to slaves in Classical Antiquity. Written at equidistant points of time from the fall of the Bastille, one of them comes

<sup>18</sup> The edition of this work used in this essay is Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des Lois*, 2 tomes (Garnier, Paris, n.d.).

<sup>19</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction. Reason in History* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 54.

before that event to denounce slavery in the name of the natural equality of men, while the other follows in its wake and rejects slavery in the name of an unlimited freedom, a universal liberty. Equality and Liberty—two words which heralded the advent of a new ruling class and a new ruling culture—are the hallmarks here of a pure *externality*. They leave the reader in no doubt that this philosophical criticism stands *outside* the paradigm of slave-owning ideology and has its feet planted firmly in another paradigm, that of the ideology of wage slavery.

Feudal historiography too is separated from its critique by a paradigmatic distance. Here again criticism arms itself with two well-known devices taken from the arsenal of bourgeois ideology. One of these is rationalism. Even Majumdar with all his admiration for Kalhaṇa feels obliged to reproach him for his faith in witches and magic, in karma and transmigration, and above all for his tendency to explain events by fate and divine will rather than 'any rational cause'.<sup>20</sup> Nothing can testify more clearly to the advent of a ruling culture that requires the past to be read as an unfolding of Reason rather than Providence and insists on Causality rather than Faith as the key to historical understanding. Foil to this abstract rationalism is an equally abstract humanism which serves as a second device to oppose feudal ideas, and Basham finds fault with the Kashmir chronicler for his failure to acknowledge man as the maker of his own history and master of his own destiny. 'Nowhere does he explicitly state', says this humanist critic, 'that man is wholly incapable of moulding in some measure his own history, but superhuman forces or kings evidently have the biggest part in the destiny of man.'<sup>21</sup>

The critique in all these instances has come from liberal ideology—the ideology of the bourgeoisie in dominance—which is, by definition, hostile to and destructive of slave-owning and feudal cultures. It is, without doubt, a critique which speaks from outside the ideological domains of the objects criticized. But that, in its turn, raises a question of fundamental importance for our inquiry. Where then, one may ask, does the critique of liberalism itself come from? It comes from an ideology that too is antagonistic towards the dominant culture and declares war on the latter even *before* the class

<sup>20</sup> Majumdar, p. 23. <sup>21</sup> Basham, p. 64.

for which it speaks comes to rule. In rushing thus in advance of the conquest of power by its class, this critique demonstrates, all over again, a historic décalage characteristic of all periods of great social transformation when a young and ascendant class challenges the authority of another that is older and moribund but still dominant. The bourgeoisie itself had dramatized such décalage during the Enlightenment by a critique of the *ancien régime* which anticipated the French Revolution by decades. And yet, for all the *appearance* of being in a hurry and arriving before its time, that critique was *true* to the real contradictions of the epoch in seizing on the feudal mode of production and its power relations as the object of its criticism.

In much the same way, the critique of the dominant bourgeois culture arises from the real contradictions of capitalism and anticipates its dissolution. This too spans a long period of transition during which the ruling culture comes increasingly under attack from a historic opposition invested with such ideals, values and ways of interpreting the world as constitute a challenge to liberalism. In so far as this challenge precedes the actual dissolution of the material basis of bourgeois dominance and the corresponding social and political structures, the critique is by its very nature still rather precocious, incomplete and generally endowed with all the immaturity of a thing in its formative stage. But it is this very want of maturity that drives the critique audaciously, if not prudently in every instance, to probe those fundamental contradictions of the existing system which prefigure its demise.

### *The Universalizing Tendency of Capital and Its Limitations*

One of such contradictions which serves as a basis for the critique of a bourgeois culture in dominance relates to the *universalizing tendency of capital*. This tendency derives from the self-expansion of capital. Its function is to create a world market for the latter, subjugate all antecedent modes of production, and replace all jural and institutional concomitants of such modes and generally the entire edifice of pre-capitalist cultures by laws, institutions, values and other elements of a culture appropriate to bourgeois rule.

'The tendency to create the *world market*', writes Marx in the *Grundrisse*, 'is directly given in the concept of capital itself. Every limit appears as a barrier to overcome.' For capital to overcome such limits means in effect, 'Initially, to subjugate every moment of production itself to exchange and to suspend the production of direct

use values not entering into exchange, i.e., precisely to posit production based on capital in place of earlier modes of production, which appear primitive [*naturwüchsig*] from its standpoint.<sup>22</sup> It is thanks to this tendency that capital strives constantly to go beyond the spatial and temporal limits to its 'self-realization process [*Selbstverwertungsprozess*]', for

while capital must on one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e. to exchange, and conquer the whole earth for its market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time, i.e., to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another. The more developed the capital, therefore, the more extensive the market over which it circulates, which forms the spatial orbit of its circulation, the more does it strive simultaneously for an even greater extension of the market and for greater annihilation of space by time.<sup>23</sup>

The radical implications of this tendency for the circulation of capital are matched by its bearing on the production aspect as well. It is indeed 'the universalizing tendency of capital, which distinguishes it', says Marx, 'from all previous stages of production.'<sup>24</sup> Unlike its historic antecedents it is a mode characterized, on one side, by a 'universal industriousness' generating 'surplus labour, value-creating labour', and on the other by 'a system of general exploitation of the natural and human qualities, a system of general utility, utilising science itself just as much as all the physical and mental qualities'.<sup>25</sup> What an immense perspective of human development is opened up thereby, what a vista of receding horizons over an endless cultural space. To quote from the *Grundrisse* again:

Thus capital creates the bourgeois society, and the universal appropriation of nature as well as of the social bond itself by the members of society. Hence the great civilizing influence of capital; its production of a stage of society in comparison to which all earlier ones appear as mere *local developments* of humanity and as *nature idolatry* ... In accord with this tendency, capital drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well as all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life. It is destructive towards all this, and constantly revolutionizes it, tearing down all the barriers which hem in the development of the forces of production, the expansion of needs, the all-sided development of production, and the exploitation and exchange of natural and mental forces.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth, 1973). p. 408.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 539    <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 540.    <sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 409.    <sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 409–10.

This eloquent passage, taken in isolation from the great body of its author's critique of capital, would make him indistinguishable from any of the myriad nineteenth-century liberals who saw nothing but the positive side of capital in an age when it was growing from strength to strength and there seemed to be no limit to its expansion and capacity to transform nature and society. One need not have been the founder of scientific socialism to compose such a paean, and some of Marx's writings—certain passages from his well-known articles on India, for instance—have indeed been read in isolation and distorted to the point of reducing his evaluation of the historic possibilities of capital into the adulation of a technomaniac.

Read in its proper context, however, the passage quoted above can be understood as nothing but the initial movement of a *critique* developed, point counter-point, in two clear steps. For the argument rounds off emphatically to suggest that *it is not about expansion alone, but about an expansion predicated firmly and inevitably on limitations capital can never overcome; not simply about a project powered by the possibility of infinite development, but a project predicated on the certainty of its failure to realize itself*. Witness how the paragraph which, in the *Grundrisse*, describes the force of capital's universalizing tendency, is followed up *immediately* by another where the author states in no uncertain terms the restrictive conditions operating on it.

But from the fact [he writes] that capital posits every such limit [e.g. 'national barriers and prejudices', 'nature worship', 'traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted statisfactions of present needs', 'reproductions of old ways of life', etc.] as a barrier and hence gets *ideally* beyond it, it does not by any means follow that it has *really* overcome it, and, since every such barrier contradicts its character, its production moves in contradictions which are constantly overcome but just as constantly posited. Furthermore. The universality towards which it irresistibly strives encounters barriers in its own nature, which will, at a certain stage in its development, allow it to be recognized as being itself the greatest barrier to this tendency, and hence will drive towards its own suspension.<sup>27</sup>

Nothing could be more explicit and indeed more devastating than this critique of the universalist pretensions of capital. It is a critique which distinguishes itself unmistakably from liberalism by a perspective that extends well beyond the rule of capital. *The continuity*

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 410.

of the latter is a fundamental presupposition in every variety of liberal thought, whereas the text cited above envisages the development of capital's universalist tendency to a stage where it 'will drive towards its own suspension'. Such prescience is particularly remarkable in view of the fact that it was contemporaneous with an ascendant and optimistic phase in the career of liberalism when, as Russell has observed, it was still secure in the belief that 'it represented growing forces which appeared likely to become victorious without great difficulty, and to bring by their victory great benefits to mankind'.<sup>28</sup>

Marx did not subscribe to this illusion at all. On the contrary, the discrepancy between the universalizing tendency of capital as an ideal and the frustration of that tendency in reality was, for him, a measure of the contradictions of Western bourgeois societies of his time and the differences which gave each of them its specificity. He used this measure to define and explain the uneven character of material development in the contemporary bourgeois world, as illustrated by the clearly differentiated moments of that development in Germany, France, England and USA, considered in an ascending order. He used it also to throw light on many of the anomalies and inconsistencies of bourgeois thought and activity. In each instance he worked out its distinctive feature in terms of the extent and manner of its inadequacy with regard to the universalist ideal.

Since the universalist claim rested largely on the recent series of historic defeats inflicted by the bourgeoisie on the forces of feudalism entrenched in the *anciens régimes* of continental Europe, Marx designed a litmus test for that claim by an examination of the tolerance for feudalism in the most representative aspect of nineteenth-century bourgeois thought, namely political economy. The latter emerged from this test as a body of knowledge which could by no means be said to have transcended the limits of feudal thought. On the contrary, some of its theoretical tensions arose directly from the compromise forced on it by varying degrees of proximity to feudalism in time and space. Thus, Petty, Cantillon and 'in general the writers who are closer to feudal times', are distinguished from their successors in one important respect: unlike the latter, they 'assume that ground-rent is the normal form of surplus-value, whereas pro-

<sup>28</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London, 1965), p. 578.

fit to them is still vaguely combined with wages, or at best looks to them like a portion of surplus-value filched by the capitalist from the landlord'.<sup>29</sup> Again, the differences between Bastiat and Carey in their attitude towards the expansionist thrust of British capital and their respective preferences for free trade and protection, and even the dissimilarities of structure and style in their arguments, are shown to have been the effect of a *spatial difference* within the history of Western feudalism: one originated in France, a country with a long record of feudal impediment to the progress of capital, and the other in USA, 'a country where bourgeois society did not develop on the foundation of the feudal system, but developed rather from itself'.<sup>30</sup>

The triumph of the universalist tendency was not obvious in bourgeois practice either. The failure of the Prussian revolution of 1848 to achieve the comprehensive character of the English and French revolutions respectively of 1648 and 1789 inspired a series of brilliant but bitter reflections on this theme from Marx in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. The performance of the nineteenth-century German bourgeoisie is distinguished here from that of their class in seventeenth-century England and eighteenth-century France in terms of their respective records in overcoming the old order. Both in 1648 and 1789, he writes, the victory of the bourgeoisie was, for its time,

*the victory of a new social order*, the victory of bourgeois ownership over feudal ownership, of nationality over provincialism, of competition over the guild, of the division of land over primogeniture, of the rule of the landowner over the domination of the owner by the land, of enlightenment over superstition, of the family over the family name, of industry over heroic idleness, of bourgeois law over medieval privileges.<sup>31</sup>

Compared to that, in Germany in 1848, 'it was not a question of establishing a new society'. The bourgeoisie there was from the outset 'inclined to betray the people and to compromise with the crowned representative of the old society, for it itself belonged to the old society; it did not represent the interests of a new society'

<sup>29</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3 (Chicago, 1909), p. 910. Emphasis added.

<sup>30</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 884 and pp. 881–93 *passim*.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 8 (London, 1977), p. 161.

against the old one, but renewed interests within an obsolete society'.<sup>32</sup>

This tendency to compromise with elements of the old order was, for Marx, 'the most striking proof' that the German revolution of 1848 was 'merely a parody of the French revolution of 1789'. In an attack on the failure of the Prussian government to abolish feudal obligations, he contrasted its vacillation in this respect to the vigour and decisiveness of the French bourgeoisie in their struggle against feudalism in 1789. Thus,

On August 4, 1789, [he wrote] three weeks after the storming of the Bastille, the French people, in a *single* day, got the better of the feudal obligations.

On July 11, 1848, four months after the March barricades, the feudal obligations got the better of the German people ...

The French bourgeoisie of 1789 never left its allies, the peasants, in the lurch. It knew that the abolition of feudalism in the countryside and the creation of a free, landowning peasant class was the basis of its rule.

The German bourgeoisie of 1848 unhesitatingly betrays the peasants, who are its *natural allies*, flesh of its own flesh, and without whom it cannot stand up to the aristocracy.

The perpetuation of feudal rights and their endorsement in the form of the (illusory) commutations—such is the result of the German revolution of 1848 ...<sup>33</sup>

The relevance of this critique for the study of colonialism can hardly be overestimated. For, the representation of the colonial project of the European bourgeoisie as a particularly convincing example of the universalist mission of capital has for long been a matter of routine with academic teaching and research, as witness, among other things, the importance of the rubric 'Expansion of Europe' in the curricula of liberal education. The constant play on this theme in text-books, dissertations and learned journals, its propagation by many of the most powerful pedagogic instruments wherever English serves as the medium of learning, has 'normalized' it, in a Kuhnian sense, as an integral part of the paradigm of liberal culture.

The effect of all this has been to generate an illusion about the power of capital and induce both the liberal-colonialist and the liberal-nationalist modes of writing about the raj to put their faith in the universalist pretensions of British capital. In other words, his-

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>33</sup> Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 7 (London, 1977), pp. 294–5.

toriography has got itself trapped in an abstract universalism thanks to which it is unable to distinguish between the *ideal* of capital's striving towards self-realization and the *reality* of its failure to do so. That is why the anomalies and contradictions which give colonialism its specific character in India are not central to the problematic of either of the dominant modes of liberal historiography. For, to construct a problematic based on a recognition of these anomalies, which are after all nothing but an unmistakable evidence of the frustration of the universalizing tendency of capital, would be to challenge the liberal paradigm itself. As a component of that paradigm, historiography can hardly afford to do so.

It is this critical failure which has been primarily responsible for a serious misrepresentation of the power relations of colonialism in historical discourse. *The crux of that misrepresentation is that dominance under colonial conditions has quite erroneously been endowed with hegemony.* This is so, because liberal historiography has been led to *presume* that capital, in its Indian career, triumphed over the obstacles to its self-expansion and subjugated all pre-capitalist relations in material and spiritual life sufficiently enough to enable the bourgeoisie to speak for all of that society as it had done in its historic incarnations in England in 1648 and France in 1789. Resistance to the rule of capital has thus been made to dissolve *ideally* into a hegemonic dominance. There is no recognition therefore in either of the dominant historical discourses that in reality the universalist project we have been discussing hurtled itself against an insuperable barrier in colonialism. Hence the attempt, in colonialist writings, to make the rule of British capital in India appear as a rule based on the consent of the subject population—that is, as hegemonic, and correspondingly to construct, in nationalist writings, the dominance of the Indian bourgeoisie as the political effect of a consensus representing all of the will of the people—that is, as hegemonic again.

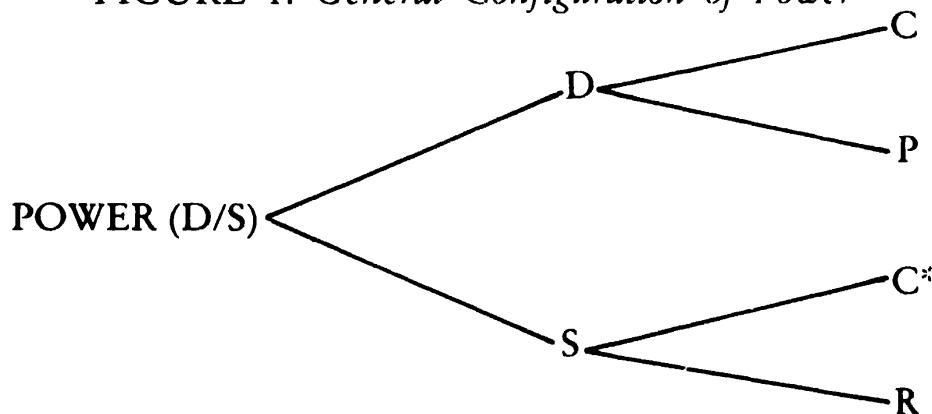
There is little in this sweet and sanitized image of dominance to illuminate and explain the harsh realities of politics during the raj. On the contrary, the presumption of hegemony makes for a seriously distorted view of the colonial state and its configuration of power. It is important, therefore, that the critique of historiography should begin by questioning the universalist assumptions of liberal ideology and the attribution of hegemony taken for granted in both the colonialist and nationalist interpretations of the Indian past. It

must begin, in short, by situating itself outside the universe of liberal discourse.

### *The Relation D/S and its Constituents*

In colonial India where the role of capital was still marginal in the mode of production and the authority of the state structured as an autocracy that did not recognize any citizenship or rule of law, power simply stood for a series of inequalities between the rulers and the ruled as well as between classes, strata and individuals among the latter themselves. However, these unequal relationships, in spite of the bewildering diversity of their form and character and their numerous permutations, may all be said to have derived from a general relation—that of Dominance (D) and Subordination (S). These two terms imply each other: it is not possible to think of D without S and vice versa. As such, they permit us to conceptualize the historical articulation of power in colonial India in all its institutional, modal and discursive aspects as the interaction of these two terms—as D/S in short.

FIGURE 1. *General Configuration of Power*



While these two terms, in their interaction, give power its substance and form, each of them, in its own turn, is determined and indeed constituted by a pair of interacting elements—D by Coercion (C) and Persuasion (P), and S by Collaboration ( $C^*$ ) and Resistance (R), as shown in Figure 1. However, the relation between the terms of each of the constitutive pairs is not quite the same as that between the terms of the parent pair. D and S imply each other just as do C and P on the one hand, and  $C^*$  and R on the other. But while D and S imply each other *logically* and the implication applies to *all* cases where an authority structure can be legitimately defined in those

terms, the same is not true of the other dyads. There the terms imply each other *contingently*. In other words, the mutual implication of D and S has a universal validity for all power relations informed by them, whereas that of C and P or of C\* and R is true only under given conditions.

The mutual implication of D and S is logical and universal in the sense that, considered at the level of abstraction, it may be said to obtain wherever there is power, that is, under all historical social formations irrespective of the modalities in which authority is exercised there. Yet, there is nothing in this abstract universality to contradict the truth of the contingency of power relations arising from the reciprocity of C and P in D and that of C\* and R in S. On the contrary, such contingency must be recognized as the site where 'human passion'—Hegel's name for the determinate aspects of 'socially significant human activity'<sup>34</sup>—mediates the *concept* of power and turns it into a *history* of dominance and subordination. Indeed, it is this interplay of the universal and the contingent, the logical and the empirical aspects of D/S that makes up 'the warp and the weft in the fabric of world history'.<sup>35</sup> This is why the *necessity* of contingency is recognized even in the ideals of absolute authority constructed by classical political philosophy, although the very notion of absolutism requires that necessity to make its appearance in the guise of exceptions to the prescribed norms of power. In other words, the contingent and the empirical stand for a zero sign even in those discourses that make the concept of power coincide ideally with its history. It is a shadow which no body politic, however authoritarian, can manage to shake off. Witness, for instance, how 'Soveraignty ... the Soule of the Common-wealth', that Hobbesian paradigm of pure Dominance and an apparently 'immortall' figure of power, is 'subject to violent death' from the contingency of 'Intestine Discord' caused by 'the ignorance and passions of men'.<sup>36</sup>

The specificities of event and experience which provide historiography with its *matériel* are all a function of this interplay of the universal and the contingent. For it is precisely the force of this mutuality which distributes the constituent elements of D and S in varying moments to make up those characteristic variations in pow-

<sup>34</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, Introduction: Reason in History* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 72–3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Harmondsworth, 1975), p. 272.

er relations that distinguish one society from another and one event from another. It can be said, borrowing a concept from political economy, that the power relation D/S differs from society to society and from event to event according to the *organic composition* of D and S. Just as the character of any fund of capital—its capacity to reproduce and expand itself—and its difference from any other fund in these respects, depend on its organic composition, that is, on the weight of its constant part relative to that of its variable part, so does the character of D/S, in any particular instance, depend on the relative weightage of the elements C and P in C and of C\* and R in S—on the organic composition of that power relation in short.

What determines that organic composition of power is of course a host of factors and their combinations, circumstantial as well as structural. In so far as these factors are not quite the same in all articulations of C and P on the one hand, and of C\* and R on the other, in so far as the presence of such factors and their combinations are specific to the societies where they obtain and help thereby to determine their individuality, the organic composition of D and S is, of necessity, contingent. Considered thus, there can be no ideal structure of power that is not subject to and modified by the contingencies of history: no Nazi fantasy of total force that is not disturbed by nightmares of dissent, no populist utopia of total consent that is not traversed by a constable's beat, if not trodden by army jack-boots. Considered thus, again, some of the vocabulary of politics which has been turned into antique hoards by the enthusiasm of collectors or debased by indiscriminate use, can return to circulation. For instance, the important word 'hegemony'—which is crucial to our argument—may now be relocated at that point where its notion intersects with the trajectory of real historical power relations.

As used in this essay, *hegemony stands for a condition of Dominance (D), such that, in the organic composition of the latter, Persuasion (P) outweighs Coercion (C)*. Defined in these terms, hegemony operates as a dynamic concept and keeps even the most persuasive structure of Dominance always and necessarily open to Resistance. At the same time, it avoids the Gramscian juxtaposition of domination and hegemony (a term sometimes used in the *Prison Notebooks* synonymously with leadership) as antinomies,<sup>37</sup> which

<sup>37</sup> For an informative note on Gramsci's use of the word 'hegemony' (*egemonia*)

has, alas, provided too often a *theoretical pretext* for the fabrication of a liberal absurdity—the absurdity of the idea of an uncoercive state—in spite of the basic drive of Gramsci's own work to the contrary. Since hegemony, as we understand it, is a particular condition of D and the latter is constituted by C and P, it follows that there can be no hegemonic system under which P outweighs C to the point of reducing it to nullity. Were that to happen, there would be no Dominance, hence no hegemony. In short, hegemony, deduced thus from Dominance, offers us the double advantage of pre-empting a slide towards a liberal-utopian conceptualization of the state and or representing *power as a concrete historical relation informed necessarily and irreducibly both by force and by consent*. We shall use this term in the sense discussed above as an aid to our study of the paradoxes of power which made the constituent elements of D and S entail each other in the manner they did in Indian politics under colonial rule.

## II. PARADOXES OF POWER

### *Idioms of Dominance and Subordination*

The articulation of D and S and their constituent elements at the purely phenomenal level of Indian politics should be evident even to unreflective observation. It will notice, from the corner of its lazy eye, that there was nothing in the nature of authority which, under British rule, was not an instance of these elements operating singly or, as was most often the case, in combination. To try and list up all such instances in an inventory would, of course, be futile. Since the

interchangeably with 'leadership' (*direzione*) and occasional exceptions to that practice, see *Prison Notebooks* (London, 1976), pp. 55–7. A passage cited in that note illustrates a characteristic use of these terms synonymously with as well as in opposition to the notion of dominance in his writings thus: '. . a class is dominant in two ways, i.e. 'leading' and 'dominant'. It leads the classes which are its allies, and dominates those which are its enemies . . there can and must be a 'political hegemony' even before the attainment of government power, and one should not count solely on the power and material force which such a position gives in order to exercise political leadership or hegemony'. Quite a few such instances will also be found in Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings* (London, 1985), pp. 104, 106, *et passim*.

field of politics, taken as a whole, was not bounded and these elements constituted that field, their number was necessarily beyond count. Also, the distribution of these instances was not definitive either in a structural or a diachronic sense. Since the elements were mutually interactive, each of their instances was subject to the over-determining effects of other instances both within and outside the province of its primary affiliation. And, again, the sheer force of contingency could, from time to time, prise any particular instance out of an originating province and assign it to another, so that what might have begun its career as an issue of, say, C or C\*, would end up by being attributed, respectively, to P or R, and vice versa.

The flux of such fusion and displacement as well as the sheer immeasurability of occurrence in an unbounded field call for an approach that should enable us to understand the operation of these elements without constructing an inventory of all their instances. For such an approach one can do no better than to start by recognizing that a principle of differentiation between two idioms is at work within each of the four constituents of D and S. *One of these idioms derives from the metropolitian political culture of the colonizers, the other from the pre-colonial political traditions of the colonized. They derive, in short, from two distinct paradigms, one of which is typically British and the other Indian.* It is the coalescence of these two idioms and their divergence which determine the tensions within each element and define its character.

### *Order and Danda*

To turn first to D and its constituents, it is clear that C comes before P and indeed before all the other elements. This precedence accrues to it by the logic of colonial state formation. For there can be no colonialism without coercion, no subjugation of an entire people in its own homeland by foreigners without the explicit use of force. Insofar as the raj was an autocracy—a description with which even some of its apologists have found it hard to disagree—C prevails in D as its crucial defining element. Its precedence in the order of elements is equally justified by the temporal development of British power in the subcontinent. For that power had established itself initially by an act of conquest, as some of the first colonialists acknowledged themselves without hesitation. They used the power of the sword effectively to cut through the maze of conflicting jurisdictions exercised by a moribund Mughal Emperor, an effete nawab

and a company of foreign merchants officiating as tax-collectors. 'There was no power in India', said Philip Francis, 'but the power of the sword, and that was the British sword, and no other.' And in saying so, he confirmed his famous rival, Warren Hastings, who, too, had spoken of the sword as the most valid title the British had to sovereignty in India.<sup>38</sup>

However, the justification of Britain's occupation of India by the right of conquest was soon to be subjected to a dialectical shift as colonialism outgrew its predatory, mercantilist beginnings to graduate to a more systematic, imperial career. What was acquired haphazardly by conquest developed, in the course of this transition, into a carefully 'regulated empire'. Corresponding to that change, the exclusive reliance on the sword, too, gave way to an orderly control in which force (without losing its primacy in the duplex system of D) had to learn to live with institutions and ideologies designed to generate consent. In other words, the idiom of conquest came to be replaced by the idiom of Order.

Within the British tradition, as indeed in bourgeois politics in general, Order is enforced by the coercive apparatus of the state. That apparatus was well on display under the raj which boasted one of the largest standing armies of the world, an elaborate penal system and a highly developed police force. Its bureaucracy was armed with powers which could and often did muzzle free speech and censor the press, curb the individual's freedom of movement and deny the right of assembly to the people—all in the name of Order. It is no wonder then that Order came to be identified with some of the most repugnant aspects of colonial rule and helped to designate it as an autocracy. What, however, made the imprimatur of colonialism particularly remarkable was that in India the official concern for Order extended to matters which were regarded in Western Europe, since the end of the absolute monarchies, as having little to do with the state or to do, at the most, with its non-coercive functions alone.

Instances abound. Thus, it is clearly on record that Order was made to preside over public health, sanitation and municipalization in the large urban centres from the very beginning of the raj. Some of the first medical reports on Calcutta were produced by the law-enforcing agencies of that city, while the operations of the army to

<sup>38</sup> Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal* (Paris and The Hague, 1963; Calcutta, 1982), p. 146.

fight the plague in Pune testified to the readiness with which official violence could step in to tackle problems of disease control. And as Veena Talwar Oldenburg tells us in her remarkable work,<sup>39</sup> the authority of the sword in urban development was unmistakable in the purely military considerations introduced by the British into the municipalization of Lucknow after the Mutiny.

In rural India, the coercive intervention of the state was allowed to encroach on a domain which was jealously guarded by the instruments and ideology of bourgeois law in metropolitan Britain. This was the domain of the body, made inviolable by *habeas corpus* and the individual's right to the security of his or her own person. But the body of the colonized person was not so secure under the rule of the same bourgeoisie in our subcontinent, as the uses of Order to mobilize manpower demonstrated again and again. A step had already been taken in the early days of the East India Company's rule towards drafting *begar* (forced labour) for public works. The memory of pressgangs used to force villagers to build roads for the Company's army under the administration of Hastings continued to be evoked in folklore well into the nineteenth century, as witness the ballad, *Rastar Kavita* of 1836.<sup>40</sup> Discontinued as official practice in the central parts of British India under late colonialism, the drafting of paharis, adivasis and in general the rural poor for portage and similar services demanded by visiting bureaucrats, continued for much longer in the outlying hilly and forest regions. In one such region, the Kumauns,<sup>41</sup> landholders were required to provide labour and services for the benefit of touring government officials and European sportsmen. They had also to supply labour for an entire range of public works. This was supposed to be paid for. But, in practice, the villagers were made to carry civilian and army baggage, set up rest huts (*chappars*), prepare sites for buildings and roads, and transport iron and timber needed for the construction of bridges—all for no remuneration at all.

Some of these aspects of forced labour, known locally as *coolie utar*, had been taken over by the British from the chieftains who

<sup>39</sup> Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856–1877* (Princeton, 1984).

<sup>40</sup> Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Vanga Sahitya Parichaya* (Calcutta, 1914), pp. 1430–2.

<sup>41</sup> The information on Kumaun used here is taken from Ramachandra Guha's essay, 'Forestry and Social Protest in British Kumaun, c. 1893–1921', in *Subaltern Studies IV* (Delhi, 1985).

ruled these hills before them. But it is one of the characteristic paradoxes of colonialism that such feudal practices, far from being abolished or at least reduced, were in fact reinforced under a government representing the authority of the world's most advanced bourgeoisie. What had been a matter of custom under the hill rajas acquired a sort of statutory dignity under the raj and was systematized by its forest department into an administrative routine. The result was to convert the management of forced labour increasingly into a concern for Order as the people became more and more resolute in their resistance to it.

The idiom of Order helped also to mobilize labour for plantations owned by Europeans. The collusion between the indigo factories of nineteenth-century Bengal and the guardians of order was such an obvious and salient feature of the local administration that even Torap, the leading peasant character of Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neel-Darpan*, failed to convince his fellow ryots about the district magistrate's innocence in this respect. It would be true, however, to say that government policy had, by this time, turned decisively against the indigo planters, so that the support they received from the local administration did not necessarily have the approval of the higher authorities.

But no such distinction could be made in the case of the tea plantations. The utterly oppressive system of labour recruitment for the Assam tea estates was sanctioned by the law of the central government and administered faithfully, even enthusiastically, by its regional representatives. At both the levels this was done as a conscious measure of solidarity with the planters, even if it meant the perpetuation of inhumanity towards the coolies. No less a person than the Law Member of the Government of India admitted that the labour contract authorized by the law was designed to commit a person to employment in Assam before he knew what he was doing and hold him to his promise for some years on the pain of arrest and imprisonment. 'Conditions like these have no place in the ordinary law of master and servant', he said. 'We made them part of the law of British India at the instance and for the benefit of the planters of Assam.' And for quite some time, until his celebrated change of heart was to occur, Henry Cotton himself lent his authority, as the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to suppress the evidence of planters' oppression in official reports and used the powers of his office to

apprehend runaway coolies and return them to their masters.<sup>42</sup>

In one vital respect the mobilization of coolies for tea plantations differed little from the mobilization of cannon-fodder for the First World War. In both cases, it was a matter of C being articulated in the idiom of Order. As recruitment for active service was made into an essential part of the Government of India's contribution to Britain's war efforts, all the coercive organs of the state from the army through the judiciary to the police and village watch were brought into operation in order to rob the vast mass of the subaltern population of its manpower. The thrust of this offensive penetrated to the deepest levels of rural society—perhaps the only imperial initiative ever to do so—especially in the regions inhabited by what the British called 'the martial races'.

In Punjab, the most important of such martial regions, recruitment was conducted more vigorously than elsewhere and yielded the largest haul. All the agencies of Order, at all levels, from the Lieutenant-Governor to lambardars, combined here to bribe and bully the peasantry into surrendering their able-bodied men to the army, and beat, torture and sometimes shoot them down for refusing to comply. How the horrors of war on the Western Front and the Middle East were thus brought home to the Punjab villages by official intervention in what was supposed to be voluntary enlistment has been documented amply enough by the Hunter Committee and the Congress Inquiry Committee of 1919–20 not to require any discussion here. The most important lesson to draw from that massive body of evidence for the purpose of our present argument is that Order, as an idiom of state violence, constituted a distinctive feature of colonialism primarily in one respect: that is, in colonial India, it was allowed to intrude again and again into many such areas of the life of the people as would be firmly kept out of bounds in metropolitan Britain. In other words, the specificity of D in the power relations of the raj derived to a significant degree from the structuring of C by Order.

But the idiom of Order did not function all by itself. It interacted with another idiom to make C what it was under colonial condi-

<sup>42</sup> Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (New Delhi, 1977), pp. 41–2.

tions. That was an *Indian* idiom—the *idiom of Danda* which was central to all indigenous notions of dominance. All the semi-feudal practices and theories of power which had come down intact from the pre-colonial era or were remoulded, without being radically altered, under the impact of colonialism, fed in varying degrees on this idiom. The private feudal armies and levies, caste and territorial panchayats governed by local elite authority, caste sanctions imposed by the elite and religious sanctions by the priesthood, bonded labour and begar, the partial entitlement of landlords to civilian and criminal jurisdiction over the tenantry, punitive measures taken against women for disobeying patriarchal moral codes, elite violence organized on sectarian, ethnic and caste lines, etc., are all instances of C framed in the idiom of *Danda*. They represent only a small sample taken from a large area of indigenous politics where almost any superordinate authority that sought support from an Indian tradition of coercion, tended inevitably to fall back on the concept of *Danda*.

That concept is central to ancient Indian polity based, in its classical form, on monarchical absolutism, and extends far beyond ‘punishment’ (which is how it is usually translated into English) to stand for all that is implied by dominance in that particular historical context. It represents, as Gonda has observed, an *ensemble* of ‘power, authority and punishment’.<sup>43</sup> It emphasizes force and fear as the fundamental principles of politics. Source and foundation of royal authority, *Danda* is regarded as the manifestation of divine will in the affairs of the state. There are no shastric discourses on *dharma* and *nīti* which are indifferent to this theme, but the *Laws of Manu* may be said to speak for all of them.<sup>44</sup> There *Danda* is described as an emanation of the supreme generative deity Brahman himself, indeed as ‘his own son’ (vii, 14)—a red-eyed, dark-skinned god (vii, 25) ‘through fear of [whom] all created beings, both the immovable and moveable, allow themselves to be enjoyed and swerve not from their duties’ (vii, 15). *Danda* is identified as the universal authority: ‘*Danda* is (in reality) the king and the male, that [is] the ruler, and that is called the surety for the four orders’ obedience to the law’ (vii, 17). Any deviation from *Danda* would turn the world upside

<sup>43</sup> Jan Gonda, *Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View* (Leiden, 1966), p. 22.

<sup>44</sup> The source of my citations from that text is *The Laws of Manu*, ed. G. Bühler, *Sacred Books of the East Series*, vol. 25 (Oxford, 1886).

down: 'If the king did not, without tiring, inflict dāṇḍa on those worthy to be punished, the stronger would roast the weaker, like fish on a spit; the crow would eat the sacrificial cake and the dog would lick the sacrificial viands, and ownership would not remain with anyone, the lower ones would (usurp the place of) the higher ones' (vii, 20–1).

This harsh concept of power served, in the colonial period, to legitimize all exercises of coercive authority by the dominant over the subordinate in every walk of life that was outside the jealously guarded realm of official Order. The sacral aspect of the idiom allowed such exercise to justify itself by a morality conforming fully to the semi-feudal values still pronounced in our culture. 'In his emphasis on the role of punishment in maintaining order', writes a distinguished student of ancient Indian polity,

some statements on the interdependence of dharma and dāṇḍa come dangerously close to identifying the legal and the moral, to assuming (at least for the lower strata of society) that moral behaviour is possible only through coercion and conformity. In this view there can be no real moral choice on the part of the masses, and fear of punishment replaces positive allegiance to dharma.<sup>45</sup>

Armed with this doctrine, every landlord could indeed play 'maharaj' to his tenants in extracting begar from them or setting his lathi-weilding myrmidons on them if they refused to oblige. Again, according to this principle, the use of violence by upper-caste elites against untouchables and adivasis or the instigation of sectarian strife by a dominant local group against the subaltern adherents of a faith other than its own, could pass as a meritorious act modelled on a sovereign's defence of dharma. And since, as noticed above, Dāṇḍa is depicted as a male (Manu: vii, 17), there could be nothing wrong about exploiting women by force either for labour or for men's sexual gratification. Indeed, punitive sanctions imposed on women for disregarding a code of sexual morality constructed entirely from a male point of view could be justified as essential for the maintenance of an undifferentiated moral order. In short, Dāṇḍa was there to uphold a putative king's authority in every little kingdom constituted by D and S in all relationships of gender, age, caste and class.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Drekmeier, *Kingship and Community in Early India* (Stanford, California, 1962), p. 10.

*Improvement and Dharma*

There were two distinct idioms at work within the element P as well. One of these was the British idiom of Improvement which informed all efforts made by the colonial rulers to relate non-antagonistically to the ruled. These included among others the introduction of western-style education (*sikshā*) and English as the language of administration and instruction, official and quasi-official patronage for Indian literary, theatrical and other artistic productions, Christian missionary efforts at ameliorating the conditions of lower-caste and tribal populations, Orientalist projects aimed at exploring, interpreting and preserving the heritage of ancient and medieval Indian culture, constitutional and administrative measures to accommodate the Indian elite in a secondary position within the colonial power structure, British paternalistic (*ma-baap*) attitude towards the peasantry, tenancy legislations, legal (if often ineffective) abolition of feudal impositions, legal and institutional measures to promote a subcontinental market consistent with colonial interests by removing pre-capitalist impediments to its development at the local and regional levels as well as by positive interventions in favour of monetization, standardization of weights and measures and the modernization of instruments of credit and means of transport, enactment of factory laws (however inadequately enforced), partial standardization of wages in certain industries, official inquiries into the conditions of workers, peasants, untouchables and adivasis, legal (though not fully effective) prohibition of widow-burning, child marriage, female infanticide and Hindu polygamy, etc., etc.

The idea of Improvement which informed these and other measures so often displayed by colonialist historiography as evidence of the essentially liberal character of the raj was a cardinal feature of the political culture of England for the greater part of a century beginning with the 1780s.<sup>46</sup> There was hardly anything in that country's economic and technological progress, its social and political movements, or in the intellectual trends of the period, which was not a response, in one sense or another, to the urge for

<sup>46</sup> Asa Briggs identifies this period of English history as 1783–1867 in *The Age of Improvement* (London, 1959), the best general survey. Elie Halévy's classic work, *The Growth of Philosophical Radicalism* (London, 1928), is still unsurpassed as an exposition of the ideological issues involved in the idea of Improvement.

Improvement—that big thrust of an optimistic and ascendant bourgeoisie to prove itself adequate to its own historic project. Since this era of Improvement coincided with the formative phase of colonialism in India, it was inevitable that the raj, too, would be caught up in some of the enthusiasm radiating from the metropolis. Indeed, India figured almost obsessively in the metropolitan discourse on Improvement, precisely because of its importance as a limiting case. Consequently, during these decades, says Briggs,

different ‘schools’ of Englishmen as well as great individuals tested their theories and tried out their ideas on Indian soil. Whigs, Evangelicals, even men of the Manchester School were drawn or driven to concern themselves with Indian as well as with English questions, with the balance sheet of commitment and responsibility, with the serious issues of freedom, authority, plan and force, above all with questions of ‘scale’ which did not always arise in the development of ‘improvement’ in England itself.<sup>47</sup>

The idea of Improvement made its debut in India with the administration of Lord Cornwallis. The verb ‘improve’ and adjectival and noun phrases based on it occurred frequently in his correspondence and official pronouncements—e.g. something like nineteen times in his two famous minutes of 18 September 1789 and 3 February 1790 written in defence of his plan for an immediate introduction of Permanent Settlement.<sup>48</sup> The latter, an echo, fifteen years later, of Philip Francis’s physiocratic doctrines, was intended to bestow permanent proprietary rights in land on the zamindars of Bengal in order to convert them into ‘economical landlords and prudent trustees of public interest’ who would transform agriculture by bringing waste lands into cultivation, building irrigation works and generally enhancing the value of landed property to an extent ‘hitherto unknown in Hindoostan’.<sup>49</sup>

But this vision of economic improvement was framed by considerations of power. Permanent Settlement was ‘indispensably necessary’ not only ‘to restore this country to a state of prosperity’, but ‘to enable it to continue to be a solid support to the British interests

<sup>47</sup> Briggs, pp. 6–7.

<sup>48</sup> *The Fifth Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company*, vol. II, pp. 510–15, 527–43. Edited by W. K. Firminger, (Calcutta, 1917). [Fifth Report].

<sup>49</sup> For some discussions on this point, see R. Guha, pp. 171–3.

and power in this part of the world'.<sup>50</sup> For the stability of that power was critically dependent on the collaboration of the propertied classes. 'In case of a foreign invasion', wrote Cornwallis,

it is a matter of the last [that is, ultimate] importance, considering the means by which we keep possession of this country, that the proprietors of the lands should be attached to us, from motives of self-interest. A landholder, who is secured in the quiet enjoyment of a profitable estate, can have no motive for wishing for a change. On the contrary, if the rents of his lands are raised, in proportion to their improvement, ... he will readily listen to any offers which are likely to bring about a change that can have no motive for wishing for a change. On the contrary, if the rents of his lands are raised, in proportion to their improvement, ... he will readily listen to any offers which are likely to bring about a change that cannot place him in a worse situation, but which hold out to him hopes of a better.<sup>51</sup>

In other words, Improvement was a political strategy to persuade the indigenous elite to 'attach' themselves to the colonial regime.

Improvement as the means of political persuasion remained central to official policy throughout the formative period of the raj between the Permanent Settlement and the Mutiny. The Governor-General who promoted this policy more vigorously and more successfully than anyone else was William Bentinck. He took over Cornwallis's legacy, nurtured and developed it with great authority, and bequeathed it to all subsequent administrations as an established principle of government. A Benthamite of sorts and admirer of James Mill, he too wrote and spoke obsessively about Improvement. An improving landlord himself in the Fenlands of his native England, he speculated about the benefits of a modest degree of capitalist development in Indian agriculture. He advocated, albeit unsuccessfully, a policy of opening up the subcontinent to British settlers with capital and skill so that their enterprise could contribute to economic prosperity by exploiting its 'singularly cheap supply of labour'.<sup>52</sup> An enthusiast for Evangelicalism, he swung the weight of the government in favour of a number of initiatives for social reform. Deeply convinced of 'the superiority which has gained us the dominion of India', he made English the principal language of government, promoted western-style education and generally en-

<sup>50</sup> *Fifth Report*, II, p. 542.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 541.

<sup>52</sup> *The Correspondence of Lord William Cavendish Bentinck*, vol. I, p. 207. Edited by C. H. Philips (Oxford, 1977). [*Bentinck Correspondence*].

couraged the propagation of a liberal culture among the intelligentsia and the urban middle classes. All this has made a historian describe him, with good reason, as a 'liberal imperialist'<sup>53</sup>—that characteristic product of nineteenth-century British politics whose historical function was to persuade the colonized and the colonizer to coexist without mutual antagonism.

However, any temptation to interpret Bentinck's success in this role as the triumph of a pure idealism must be tempered by the recognition that his liberalism was the faithful and astute instrument of a hard-headed imperialism. For, this was, in effect, his response to that fear which haunted so many of the more perceptive British observers during the second quarter of the nineteenth century—the fear that the regime's isolation from the people under its rule would gravely undermine its security.<sup>54</sup> 'Is there anywhere the prospect of our obtaining, in a season of exigency', Bentinck wondered, 'that co-operation which a community, not avowedly hostile, ought to afford to its rulers? Is it not rather true that we are the objects of dislike to the bulk of those classes who possess the influence, courage, and vigour of character which would enable them to aid us?'<sup>55</sup> It is the latter's attachment to the raj which he sought to ensure, in the true Cornwallis tradition, by the politics of Improvement—a strategy of persuasion to make imperial dominance acceptable, even desirable, to Indians. All the initiatives which originated with the colonial state for educational, social and generally cultural reform, all laws, regulations and institutions by which it sought to ameliorate the material conditions of our people, all its measures to 'civilize' us and contribute to our 'happiness' in conformity to the doctrines of Evangelicalism and Utilitarianism were variations on the idiom of Improvement, a derivative of metropolitan liberalism which operated, under colonial conditions, as an active principle of the element P in D/S.

The success of that strategy can hardly be exaggerated. Combined with a fair amount of force, it helped Britain to keep the antagonism of the subject population well under control in spite of the two extensive rebellions of 1857 and 1942 and many local uprisings. That peace between the rulers and the ruled was mediated to no mean ex-

<sup>53</sup> The reference is to John Rosselli's authoritative work, *Lord William Bentinck. The Making of a Liberal Imperialist* (London, 1974).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 182–3.

<sup>55</sup> *Bentinck Correspondence*, 1, p. 203.

tent by the indigenous elite. Thanks to the propagation of western-style education, they had imbibed the ideology of liberal-imperialism well enough to believe that 'dominion by the English would be conducive to the happiness of *projas*'—the prophecy which, at the conclusion of *Anandamath*, persuades its hero to withdraw from armed opposition to the raj. Nothing could demonstrate the power of that ideology more clearly than its author's notion of such happiness both as a benefit of positivist knowledge acquired from the West and as an outcome of the assimilation of Utilitarianism to the supposedly rational core of Hindu religious culture.<sup>56</sup>

What made such assimilation possible was the presence of an Indian idiom of politics—the idiom of Dharma—alongside the British idiom of Improvement in P. For it was to Dharma that the indigenous elite turned in order to justify and explain the initiatives by which they hoped to make their subordinates relate to them as non-antagonistically as possible. Even when such an initiative was clearly liberal in form and intent, e.g. setting up a school, its rationale was sought in Dharma, understood, broadly, as the quintessence of 'virtue, the moral duty', which implied a social duty conforming to one's place in the caste hierarchy as well as the local power structures—that is, conforming to what Weber called the ‘“organic” societal doctrine of Hinduism’.<sup>57</sup> In this sense, any elite authority, whether exercised by an individual or a group, would model itself on *rajadharma*, the archetypal dominance of Hindu polity, and imply not only the prerogatives of coercion (*danda*) but also an obligation to protect, foster, support and promote the subordinate. The ideal, consecrated both by myth, as in that of King Pr̥thu, the primordial provider and protector, and by prescription as in the Samhitās and the Śāntiparava and Anusāsanikaparva of the Mahābhārata, could, under certain historical circumstances, act as a

<sup>56</sup> See *Bankim-Rachanabali*, vol. I, p. 787 (Sahitya Samsad Edition, Calcutta, Bengali Year 1363) for the point on positivist knowledge, and for its assimilation to Hinduism, his *Dharmatattva*, especially ch. 22 *et passim* in ibid., vol. II (Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, Bengali Year 1371). In Bankimchandra's usage, *bahirbishyak jnan* stands for positivist knowledge, *hitabād* for Utilitarianism, and *anushilan dharma* for Hindu spiritual culture.

<sup>57</sup> Max Weber, *The Religion of India* (New York, 1958), p. 147; Drekmeyer, p. 8.

powerful instrument of class conciliation.<sup>58</sup> Kosambi comments on this with profound insight in his discussion of Asokan *dhamma*:

The state developed a new function after Ásoka, the reconciliation of classes. This had never been visualised by the *Arthaśāstra* .. The special tool for this conciliatory action was precisely the universal *dhamma* in the new sense. King and citizen found common meeting-ground in freshly developed religion ... It can even be said that the Indian national character received the stamp of *dhamma* from the time of Ásoka. The word soon came to mean something else than 'equity', namely religion—and by no means the sort of religion Ásoka himself professed. The most prominent future cultural developments thereafter would always bear the misleading outer cover of some *dharma*. It is altogether fitting that the present Indian national symbol is derived from what remains of the Asokan lion-capital at Sarnath.<sup>59</sup>

Between the Asokan and Nehruite phases of its career the concept is invoked by yet another generation of the elite in its endeavour to build neither a kingdom nor even a dynastic republic but a nation as the stepping stone for its access to power. Wanting both in the material conditions and the culture adequate for this task, its attempt to speak for the nation relied heavily on the traditional idiom of Dharma, with the curious result that something as contemporary as nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalism often made its appearance in political discourse dressed up as ancient Hindu wisdom. This is why even in its very first (if unsuccessful) attempt to mobilize the masses in a campaign of opposition to the raj, the nationalist elite, in the course of the Swadeshi Movement of 1903–8, made Dharma into a unifying (*aikya*) and harmonizing (*saman-jasya*) principle of politics, as witness the many writings of the great ideologue of that period, Rabindranath Tagore. Commenting on the patriotic upsurge against Curzon's plan to partition Bengal he observed:

What is it that lies at the root of all our miseries? It lies in our mutual isolation. It therefore follows that any serious application to the cause of our country's welfare must be addressed to the work of uniting the disparate Many of our land. What is it that can unify the disparate Many? Dharma.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Gonda, pp. 128–31; Drekmeier, pp. 21, 67n., 138, 297; Weber, p. 145.

<sup>59</sup> D. D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India* (Delhi, 1972), p. 165. How the term 'dharma' has evolved in meaning has been discussed by P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, vol. I, pp. 1–6 (Poona, 1968).

<sup>60</sup> *Rabindra-Rachanabali*, XII, p. 919 (Centenary Edition, Calcutta, 1961). There

The idiom of Swadeshi politics which thus identified Dharma with patriotic duty on the one and with Hindu religiosity on the other, failed, in the event, to conciliate the mutually antagonistic interests with the body politic—especially the opposing interests of Hindu and Muslim sectarian politics. The more the Hindu middle classes united in a nationalism inspired by Dharma, the more the exclusive aspects of Hindu Dharma divided the nation, ranging the peasantry against the rural gentry, the Namasudras against upper castes, and above all Muslims and Hindus against each other.

Subsequently, even after the Congress had emerged as a mass party under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership and the nationalist elite acquired a relatively broader base for itself in Indian politics, its urge to speak for the nation was still wanting in those material and spiritual conditions which alone would have made it possible to do so.

As a result, the idiom of Dharma continued to influence elite political discourse, especially that particular variety of it which refused to acknowledge class struggle as a necessary and significant instrument of the struggle against imperialism. Since Gandhism was, in this period, the most important of all the ideologies of class collaboration within the nationalist movement, it was also the one that had the most elaborate and most frequent recourse to the concept of Dharma.

This is documented so well in all that was significant about Gandhi's ideas and practice that it would do, for the economy of the present discussion, to limit ourselves to his theory of trusteeship which epitomizes it. 'It is the duty of the ruler', he wrote,

to serve his people. What I have said about the ruler applies to all owners of wealth. Just as it is the duty of the ruler to be the trustee and friend of the people, so that of the latter is not to be jealous of the former. The poor man must know that to a great extent poverty is due to his own faults and shortcomings. So while the poor man must strive to improve his condition, let him not hate the ruler and wish his destruction ... He must not want rulership for himself, but remain content by earning his own wants. This condition of mutual co-operation and help is the *Swaraj* of my conception.

Another name for that *Swaraj* is *Dharmaraj*, literally, the Rule of Dharma: 'A just administration is *Satyayuga* (Age of Truth), *Swar-*

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are numerous statements to this effect in Tagore's writings of this period. Many other examples occur in *ibid.*, pp. 673–1099.

aj, Dharmaraj, Ramraj, people's government. In such government, the ruler will be the protector, trustee and friend of the people'.<sup>61</sup>

Gandhi made no secret of the practical uses he had in mind for this theory. It was formulated and avowed in opposition to socialist theory and in defence of landlordism. 'I enunciated this theory', he said, 'when, the socialist theory was placed before the country in respect to the possessions held by zamindars and ruling chiefs'.<sup>62</sup> To avoid class struggle in the countryside, he pleaded with the landlords to 'regard themselves, even as the Japanese nobles did [!], as trustees holding their wealth for the good of their wards, the ryots'.<sup>63</sup> In his Dharmaraj, 'a model zamindar' would help his ryots to overcome their 'ignorance of the laws of sanitation and hygiene' and

He will study the economic condition of the ryots under his care, establish schools in which he will educate his own children side by side with those of the ryots. He will purify the village well and the village tank. He will teach the ryot to sweep his roads and clean his latrines by himself doing this necessary labour. He will throw open without reserve his own gardens for the unrestricted use of the ryot. He will use as hospital, school or the like most of the unnecessary buildings which he keeps for his pleasure.

In general, he expected that 'model zamindar' to 'reduce himself to poverty in order that the ryot may have the necessities of life'. It is a measure of his commitment to this ideology of class conciliation based on the continuity of the tenants' subordination to the landlord that these hopeful lines were published in *Young India* in December 1929 when the peasantry were being driven by the force of the Depression to rise against the zamindars and talukdars of UP. These sentiments, he wrote, were inspired by the very positive impressions he had gained, during a recent tour of that province, of some young landlords who 'had simplified their lives and fired by patriotic zeal were easing the burden of the ryots'.

<sup>61</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Economic and Industrial Life and Relations*, vol. 1, pp. 37, 38. Edited by V. B. Kher (Ahmedabad, 1957). Reproduced from *Harijan*, 30 October 1949.

<sup>62</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Trusteeship*, p. 5. Compiled by R. Kalekar (Ahmedabad, 1960). Reproduced from *Harijan*, 3 June 1939.

<sup>63</sup> The source of this and the other excerpts from Gandhi's writings in the next two paragraphs is his *Young India* (5 December 1929) article, 'Zamindars and Talukdars' as reproduced in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* [hereafter, *CWMG*], XLII: 239–40.

In the same article he also hoped that the capitalist class would 'read the signs of the times' and voluntarily surrender their wealth before 'the impending chaos into which, if the capitalist does not wake up betimes, awakened but ignorant, famishing millions will plunge the country and which, not even the armed force that a powerful government can bring into play can avert'. His appeal to the capitalists' fear of the consequences of class struggle and their sense of Dharma did not, apparently, go unheeded. For, the article quoted above was followed exactly a fortnight later, in the pages of the same journal, by extracts from a speech delivered by a leading capitalist at the Maharashtra Merchants' Conference.<sup>64</sup> 'Speaking on the duty of capitalists', wrote Gandhi in an editorial note, 'he [the speaker] presented an ideal which it will be difficult even for a labour man to improve upon'. One could say, with equal justification, that the application of the Gandhian theory of trusteeship in favour of capitalism could hardly have been done better by Gandhi himself. For the speech testifies to the ingenuity with which the most advanced section of the bourgeoisie used the idiom of Dharma in order to promote class conciliation as well as to secure a place for its own interests within the developing ideology of elitist nationalism. The speaker was Ghanshyamdas Birla.

In his speech Birla deplored that the modern capitalist was treated as an alien 'belonging to a separate class', which he felt was not in agreement with Indian tradition:

in the days of yore the situation was something quite different. If we analyse the functions of the Vaishya of the ancient times, we find that he was assigned the duty of production and distribution not for personal gain but for common good. All the wealth that he amassed, he held as a trustee for the nation.

Having assimilated thus the present to the past, capitalist to Vaiśya, his social and economic role to the functionalism of *varnāśrama-dharma*, his hunt for profit to a concern for common good, exploitation to trusteeship and above all his class interest to the national interest, Birla then goes on to exhort his audience of industrialists and traders to act up to their *swadharma*, that is, 'fulfil their real function . . . not as exploiters, but as servants of society', as those genuinely engaged in production and distribution 'for the ser-

<sup>64</sup> 'The Duty of Capitalists' in *Young India* (19 December 1929) as reproduced in CWMG, XLII: 294.

vice of the community'. All this, to ward off the spectre of class struggle, and avert the chaos of popular violence about which Gandhi had warned the bourgeoisie. 'No Communism or Bolshevism can thrive if we know and discharge our duty', said Birla. 'If I may say so, it is we who provided a fertile soil for the development of Communism and Bolshevism by relegating our duty to the background. If we knew our duty and followed it faithfully, I am sure that we could save society from many evils'. This identification of Communism and Bolshevism, the most radical of all the contemporary movements of class struggle, as 'evils', that is *adharma*, corresponds to the dharmic function of trusteeship assigned by Gandhi to indigenous capitalism and willingly accepted by Birla on the latter's behalf.

Thus, the penetration of elite nationalism by the interests of big business came to be mediated by the classical idiom of political conciliation—Dharma. Within the relation D/S, it invested the element P with a characteristically Indian ingredient to match the British ingredient of Improvement, brought to it by liberal-imperialism. The purpose served by each idiom, in its respective domain, was to assuage contradictions by making them mutually non-antagonistic and enable the engine of dominance to run on smoothly.

### *Obedience and Bhakti*

We have noticed how the idea of Improvement had already been caught up in the drift of Utilitarianism even when it was still associated with Physiocracy and how it was eventually assimilated to the mainstream of Utilitarian thought in full by the 1820s under Bentinck. The British idiom which informs the element C\* is also derived from the same source. This is the idiom of Obedience which is emphasized in early Benthamite thought and its rejection of Locke's theory of an 'original contract' in favour of Hume's notion of authority. The principle of utility does not deny the legitimacy of resistance in 'exceptional cases'—a question to which we shall soon return—but maintains that 'obedience is the rule',<sup>65</sup> true to which Bentham thought it fit to side with the Crown both against Wilkes and the American rebels of 1776. In other words, the subjects owed loyalty to the government for the sake of their own happiness. The struggles for reform and republicanism which frightened authority

<sup>65</sup> Halévy, p. 140.

everywhere in Europe during the first half of the nineteenth century helped merely to strengthen the idiom of Obedience in conservative political thinking and assimilate it, by the high-noon of mid Victorian imperialism, to the concept of duty, as witness the writings of Samuel Smiles whose highly influential *Self-Help* (1859) is said to have 'voiced the dominant philosophy of his age'.<sup>66</sup>

Smiles followed up the success of that initial work by three other equally popular publications—all on the ideals of social and political morality—culminating in one called *Duty* (1880). Here 'obedience to duty' is identified as 'the very essence of the highest civilized life'. Regarded as 'a larger creed and a loftier code' than what is involved in 'the routine of worldly-wise morality', it approximates religiosity in so far as it involves conscience and 'the cultivation of all the faculties which God has given us'<sup>67</sup>—a recipe for individualism which, as Briggs has observed, put Smiles within the same Utilitarian lineage as John Stuart Mill.<sup>68</sup> Obedience and duty coincide with the entire domain of social and political morality—'obedience to the parent, to the master, to the officer' and 'duty to God' followed by 'duty to one's family; duty to our neighbours; duty of masters to servants, and of servants to master; duty to our fellow-creatures; duty to the State, which has also its duty to perform to the citizen'. As such, Obedience must be inculcated in all members of the society in childhood and emphasized throughout their lives. That, for Smiles, was a task specific to his own generation: 'The task of our fathers has been to conquer right; be it the task of this generation to teach and propagate duty'.<sup>69</sup>

In this insistence on duty rather than right one can see the continuity, indeed resurgence, of that authoritarian aspect of Utilitarian thought which was so conspicuous in Hume and the younger Bentham. It registers the spirit of a dominant bourgeoisie which had used the power of dissidence on its way to the top, but having arrived there found it easier to live with conformism. Smiles, on his part, does not deny that protest and resistance have a place in the

<sup>66</sup> Asa Briggs in 'Introduction' to Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help* (Centenary Edition: London, 1958), p. 15.

<sup>67</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Duty* (London, 1908), pp. 2, 4, 7.

<sup>68</sup> See Briggs, 'Introduction', p. 9, commenting on J. S. Mill's words used as an epigraph to the first chapter of Smiles, *Self-Help*: 'the worth of a State, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it.'

<sup>69</sup> Smiles, *Duty*, pp. 3, 4, 11.

Christian sentiment, but is firmly of the opinion that 'obedience, self-restraint and selfgovernment', rather than liberty, 'are the conditions chiefly to be aimed at'. Failure in this regard is, according to him, fraught with such negative consequences as 'the mad riot in human life . . . among the Nihilists in Germany and Russia, and the fire and destruction of the Communists' war in Paris'.

Nearer home, he deplores the suffragette movement as 'the outcries of women who protest against their womanhood and wildly strain to throw off their most lovable characteristics . . . want power—political power and the desire to be "enfranchised"', even though 'St Paul gave the palm to the women who were stayers and workers at home'. He also regrets the 'widening chasm which divides the various classes of society' as 'the main evil of our time' when the rich and the poor 'shrink back' from each other and 'sympathy seems to be dying out between employers and employed' in the great manufacturing towns<sup>70</sup>—a remarkable, though by no means solitary, instance of a sentiment once so supportive of Chartism pulling up sharply as it comes face to face with the enduring force of class struggle.<sup>71</sup>

In all such deviation from obedience and duty Smiles saw the tragic decline of 'the old principle that the world must be ruled by kind and earnest guardianship'. However, there was still a place in the world where that 'old principle' was very much alive and guardianship was earnestly, if not altogether kindly, exercised. That was India under British rule. It provided the book with a great many of its 'Illustrations of Courage, Patience, and Endurance'—all based on the exploits of British officials of the Indian army. In general, the soldier was, for the author, the supreme exemplar of the virtues of obedience and duty: 'We often connect the idea of Duty with the soldier's trust'; and 'Obedience, submission, discipline, courage—these are among the characteristics which make a man; they are also those which also make the true soldier'. The army could therefore be said to epitomize what an ideal society, governed by discipline, should be; for 'discipline in the army is nothing but discipline in private life—that is, sense of duty, obedience to appointed superiors, respect for the principles of authority and established institutions'.<sup>72</sup> That being so, where could one find duty, obedience

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp. 11, 31, 46, 295.

<sup>71</sup> Briggs, 'Introduction', p. 12.

<sup>72</sup> Smiles, *Duty*, pp. 3, 48, 209, 295.

and respect for authority more thoroughly and more successfully practised than in the army that had built up the Indian empire and saved it from destruction in 1857?

Produced during the two decades which immediately followed the Mutiny, all of Smiles's writings exude the heavy and—for his chauvinistic working-class and petty-bourgeois readership, endearing—smell of gunpowder. At a time when Britain was painting the map red in three continents, his 'heroes' are mostly professional soldiers, with the pride of place going to those serving in the Indian subcontinent. About a dozen of them crowd into the pages of *Duty*.<sup>73</sup> 'It is by the valour and honesty of such men', we are told, 'that the Empire of India has been maintained. They have toiled at their duty, often at the risk of their lives'. And the point is driven further home by martyrology, as Smiles quotes an inscription on the tombstone of one of the more notorious British army chiefs of 1857: 'Here lies Henry Lawrence who tried to do his Duty!'

If duty performed in defence of the empire had to be invoked in order to reinforce the 'old principle' of guardianship in metropolitan society, it was propagated all the more vigorously by the guardians of the raj to ensure the loyalty of their subjects. Protocols, codes, emblems and rituals were elaborately worked out to promote a veritable cult of loyalism as witness the ceremonies prescribed for royal, viceregal and provincial darbars, for official visits ranging from grand tours by members of the royal family to routine administrative rounds by magistrates and judges, for the celebration of the King's, Queen's and Queen Mother's birthdays, etc.<sup>74</sup> Above all, the cult was activated to induce collaboration whenever the regime felt insecure for political or military reasons. On such occasions, the appeal to loyalty would proceed by emphasizing the mutuality of interest between the rulers and the ruled in, say, constitutional reforms or defence of the realm, with the former glorified as partnership, power sharing, self-government and the latter as patriotism.

How the idiom of Obedience helped to shape Indian collaboration at such crises may be studied in the light of Gandhi's record during the Boer War when, as even the hagiographer Tendulkar

<sup>73</sup> For these names and the observation quoted here, see *ibid.*, pp. 93–7.

<sup>74</sup> I owe my awareness of this ceremonial aspect of loyalism to some of the current researches and publications of Bernard S. Cohn.

admits, 'his loyalty to the empire drove him to side with the British in the teeth of opposition from some of his countrymen'.<sup>75</sup> His offer for help, made on behalf of the Indian community in South Africa, was at first treated by the British with almost undisguised contempt. However, they were eventually persuaded to accept it and an Indian Ambulance Corps, made up of over 1000 Indian stretcher-bearers, was formed and allowed to serve at the front.<sup>76</sup> The speeches and writings in which Gandhi justifies his offer and reflects on its outcome between October 1899 and April 1900 constitute a classic text of collaborationist nationalism:

We do not know how to handle arms. It is *not our fault*; it is perhaps *our misfortune* that we cannot, but it may be there are other *duties* . . . and, no matter of what description they may be, we would consider it a *privilege to be called upon to perform them*. . . . If an unflinching *devotion to duty* and an extreme *eagerness to serve our Sovereign* can make us of, any use on the field of battle, we trust we would not fail. . . .

The *motive* underlying this humble offer is to endeavour to prove that, *in common with other subjects* of the Queen-Empress in South Africa, the Indians, too, are ready to *do duty for their Sovereign* on the battlefield. The offer is meant to be an *an earnest of the Indian loyalty*. (19 October 1899)

Some local *English-speaking Indians* met together a few days ago, and decided that *because they were British subjects, and as such demanded rights*, they ought to forget their domestic differences, and irrespective of their opinion on the justice of the war, render some *service, no matter how humble*, on the battlefield during the crisis, even if it were to act as bearers of the wounded . . . They have *offered their services without pay, unconditionally*, to the Government or the Imperial authorities, stating that they do not know how to handle arms, and that they would consider it *a privilege if they could perform some duty, even menial*, on the battlefield. (27 October 1899)

. . . the *English-speaking Indians* came to the conclusion that they would offer their services, *unconditionally and absolutely without payment* . . . in order to *show* the Colonists that they were *worthy subjects* of the Queen. (13 December 1899)

When the *joyful news* of the relief of Kimberley and Ladysmith was flashed across the wire, the Indians vied with the Europeans in their *patriotic zeal* to celebrate the occasion . . . (16 June 1900)

This meeting of the Indian subjects of Her Majesty the Queen-Empress . . . records with *gratification* the fact that it is the *hero of Kan-*

<sup>75</sup> D. G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, vol. 1, p. 53 (new edition; Delhi, 1960).

<sup>76</sup> CWMG, III, p. 137.

*dahar, and sometime Commander-in-Chief of the Forces in India, [Lord Roberts,] who is leading the British Forces in South Africa from victory to victory.* (n.d.)

You have *shown your patriotism* and brought *honour to yourself and your country* by joining the Indian Ambulance Corps as a leader and have thereby rendered service both to your own self and *your motherland*. It will, therefore, behove you to look upon that as *a reward in itself*. (20 April 1900).<sup>77</sup>

These excerpts show how the colonial subject constitutes himself in a loyalist discourse. To turn first to its structural aspect, notice that Gandhi situates 'the English-speaking Indians', for whom he speaks, in the D/S relation by affirming their subordination to a named sovereign power as 'British subjects', 'subjects of the Queen', 'subjects of Her Majesty the Queen-Empress'. The self-subjection is further defined by an 'extreme eagerness to serve' and the offer of 'their services without pay, unconditionally'—phrases which are both description and measure of the distance between the dominant and the dominated. And the adjectives qualifying those services as 'humble' and 'menial' are also an index of the loyalist's intention to identify himself with the inferior term in D/S.

And as the colonizer and the colonized are thus assigned their respective places in D/S, the discourse proceeds to valorize the terms of the loyalist's subordination, which are specified now as humble, menial, unconditionally rendered services. These are conceptualized as a duty which derives its value from being performed at two levels. It is, at one level, 'duty for their sovereign'. As such, it is a privilege—a figure of reward bestowed by patron on client. But, at the same time and at another level, it is duty done for the 'motherland', hence an act of patriotism. The effect of this identification of empire and motherland is to develop a tension within the concept of duty. For it emphasizes, on the one hand, the filial attachment of the colonized subject to the colonizing sovereign, 'Her Majesty the Queen-Empress', the mother whose image occurs so often in so many infantile varieties of Indian politics of the period. It is thanks to such attachment that the servant, in a state of extreme alienation, can regard the master's success as his own, celebrate the 'joyful news' of the relief of Kimberley and Ladysmith, derive vicarious

<sup>77</sup> Excerpts taken from CWMG, II, pp. 113–14, 119–20, 129, 141, 143, 147–8. Emphasis added.

'gratification' from the South African triumphs of those very imperial forces which kept him in bondage in South Asia.

Yet, on the other hand, patriotism also implies as sense of belonging to one's *own* country, and as soon as the colonized arrives at a recognition of the colony as 'motherland'—a political domain unmediated by alien power—he may be said to be pulling away from servility, however feebly, towards an assertion of independence. That new orientation is hardly perceptible at first. If there is any movement in it, that is still altogether negative, in the form of a slowing down, but by no means a cutting out, of the engine of subservience. In that relative stillness, the sense of duty, with all its externality reduced to nothing by the contrary pulls of subordination and self-determination, looks inward, so that patriotism, as a service rendered 'to your own self', acquires a reflexive value and becomes 'a reward in itself'. This inwardness, which could have been so easily absorbed into religiosity as a typically Gandhian sort of 'spiritualized politics', is forced by the contradictions of imperialism itself to launch on the historic trajectory of citizenship. Its first tentative and diffident steps in that direction are also recorded in the demonstrative aspects of this otherwise grossly loyalist discourse.

For loyalism is not content simply with situating itself in the structure of D/S and providing an ideological justification for C\*. It is demonstrative by its very nature: it speaks up because it wants to be noticed. The 'motive' which inspired the Indians to offer their service was an endeavour, writes Gandhi, 'to prove' their readiness to go to the front and 'to show the Colonists that they were worthy subjects of the Queen'. In other words, the so-called 'earnest' of loyalty was meant as a display to secure the white settlers' and the imperial government's recognition of the sincerity and usefulness of Indian collaboration. There was nothing venal about it: the services were offered without any pecuniary expectation and indeed without any condition at all. Although this particular stipulation was eventually turned down by the authorities who insisted on the Indian stretcher-bearers accepting a weekly wage of 20 shillings—15 shillings less than what was paid to the whites for the same job—it does not take away from the honourable character of Gandhi's original proposal.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, he went on emphasizing the purely voluntary and disinterested nature of the offer. For the colonized, recognition

<sup>78</sup> CWMG, III, p. 137.

of their services by the imperial overlords on any terms at all would have been 'a privilege', that is an honour done by the master to the servant by acknowledging the latter's servitude.

But there was an element in Gandhi's proposal which clearly exceeded—and in view of his transparent sincerity, seems to have deviated from—the pure morality of subordination. It is true that he asked for no material rewards as the price of collaboration. Yet he had obviously a reward in mind. The Indians, he said, had decided to bury their differences and unite in serving the empire at this crisis 'because they were British subjects, and as such demanded rights'. What rights? A colonial subject is not a citizen, hence has no rights. The notion of duty as a correlate of right derives from a code that does not recognize the relation between the ruler and the ruled as one between master and servant—that is, a 'code according to which all who owe allegiance to the state are equal in the eye of the law. Such a code is quite out of place in a colonial state whose legitimacy is based ultimately on the right of conquest and which, unlike the state mentioned by Smiles, has no 'duty to perform to the citizen'.

In mentioning Indians' rights in the same breath as their duties, Gandhi was therefore switching codes, and going, almost in spite of himself, against the grain of his own well-rehearsed and still undented faith in the legal and moral validity of British paramountcy. In that indecisive switch one can already see the symptoms of a liberal-nationalist dilemma which was to give Indian politics so much of its tone and character. For even when, after Jalianwalabagh, Gandhi himself had moved from loyalism to opposition in his attitude to British rule, the idiom of Obedience continued to inspire, in varying degrees, the so-called moderate—an euphemism for conservative—trends in Indian liberal politics. More importantly, the same idiom made its influence felt even within that variety of liberal-nationalism where the notion of the colonized subject's right was, for most of the time, so busy chasing its own tail—the notion of his duty to the colonial master—that the cautious anti-imperialism of the elite never managed fully to emerge from the maze of bargaining and pressure-politics to assert, *without equivocation*, the subject's right to rebel. Hence, the legalism, constitutionalism and the many shades of compromise between collaboration and dissent which were so characteristic of elite nationalism.

If the politics of collaboration was informed by the Humean idiom of Obedience—however uneasy that obedience might have been under the hushed, almost hopeless, urge for enfranchisement among the colonized—it drew its sustenance, at the same time, from a very different tradition—the Indian tradition of Bhakti. All the collaborationist moments of subordination in our thinking and practice during the colonial period were linked by Bhakti to an inert mass of feudal culture which had been reproducing loyalism and depositing it in every kind of power relation for centuries before the British conquest.<sup>79</sup> The *Bhagavad-Gītā* served as the ur-text for that ideology, and religion helped to justify and propagate it by an array of cults, precepts, institutions and codes. That is why the essentials of Indian politics can never be grasped without an understanding of religion.

How Bhakti promotes collaboration is easily demonstrated by a reference to its principal modalities, known as *rasas* (a term in which metaphysics blends with aesthetics), namely, *dāsyā*, *sānta*, *sakhyā*, *vātsalyā* and *śringāra*. Of these, *dāsyā*, literally the quality of being a servant, slave or bondsman, is by far the most important. As a rasa it implies that the devotee regards himself as his deity's servant, and 'this feeling of servitude (*dāsyam-manyatvam*) is said to underlie and uplift all devotional practices'.<sup>80</sup> These devotional practices, as laid down in the shastric injunctions of Vaishnavism, include rituals of overt servility like attending on the deity's feet (*padasevā*), drinking the water used to wash his feet (*charanāmṛtapāna*) and 'prostration at full length like a log of wood' (*dandavatpranāma*),<sup>81</sup> the deity being represented of course by an image or a human surrogate such as a guru, priest or cultic officiant. And, at a philosophical level, devotion stands for *ātmānivedana* or 'complete surrender of self which consists of the feeling that one's body, mind, the senses and soul are all intended for the Bhagavat'.<sup>82</sup> *Dāsyā*, this sentiment of total servility to the deity, represents the essential characteristic (*swarūpa-lakṣhaṇa*) of Bhakti for many of its adherents, especially those who subscribe to the cult of Rāma.<sup>83</sup> Tulsi Das, from whose

<sup>79</sup> Kosambi, pp. 208–9.

<sup>80</sup> Sushil Kumar De, *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal*, p. 372 (second edition; Calcutta, 1961).

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pp. 370–2.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 372.

<sup>83</sup> F. R. Allchin, 'Introduction' to Tulsi Das, *The Petition to Rām* (London, 1966), p. 59.

work they have drawn sustenance for nearly five centuries, idealizes the services rendered to Rāma by an untouchable (Guha), a woman (Śabari), and an ape (Hanumān) as the highest spiritual achievement, as witness the many verses bearing on this theme in *The Petition to Rām*.<sup>84</sup> ‘The ocean of existence’, he writes in the celebrated *Rām-charitmanas*, ‘cannot be crossed over without the emotion of the servant for the master’.<sup>85</sup>

Even among cults in which dāsyā is less emphasized, it dominates over the other rasas as the ruling principle of Bhakti. Of these, sānta, the pacific mode, which stands for an intellectual attitude and hence sometimes called *jñāna-bhakti*, ‘is regarded as the lowest in the scale of primary Rasas’, according to De.<sup>86</sup> But the remaining and more substantial modes have all an element of willing servitude—dāsyam-manyatvam, the internalization of dāsyā on the ‘devotee’s part—presupposed in them. Thus vātsalya, the filial mode, implies that the devotee acknowledges his subordination to the deity to be of the same order as a child’s to its parent. And sakhyā, the mode of friendship, also derives from the disparity of status between subaltern and superordinate: conceptualized in terms of Krishna’s relation with his adolescent companions during his days as a cowherd in Vrindavan, it is, as in that cycle of legends, a relation among equals of whom Krishna was *primus inter pares*.

Even in śringāra, the erotic mode, there is no notion of equality between devotee and deity. The function of this rasa is primarily to spiritualize and aestheticize male dominance of gender relations. In the numerous legends about Krishna’s sexual adventures among the milkmaids (gopīs) of Vraj, the initiative is always his to seduce, dally with and desert his female partners. It is a relationship of love that is an authentic instance of the primacy assumed by the male in the sexual politics of a patriarchal society. This implies, among other things, the passivity of the female. Bhakti actually prescribes such passivity by depicting the gopīs as women who have no sexual passion (*prākṛta-kāma*) of their own, but are merely conducive to Krishna’s pleasure: ‘in all these ecstatic sports the Gopis never had

<sup>84</sup> See, for instance, hymn nos. 27–9, 144, 152, 163–6, 215, 253 in Tulsi Das, *The Petition to Rām*.

<sup>85</sup> *Uttarakānda*: 119 as quoted in Allchin, p. 59.

<sup>86</sup> De, p. 408. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, the eminent authority on Hindi literature, concurs with this view: ‘The worshippers of Kṛṣṇa say that the pacific sentiment is the lowest.’ Quoted in Allchin, p. 58.

the slightest desire for their own pleasure, but all their efforts were directed towards effecting the supreme pleasure of the Bhagavat'.<sup>87</sup>

The sexual instrumentality of women is then spiritualized by the śṛngāra mode (also known as *madhura-bhāva*) into an ideal of love that transcends all that is of the body and of the world. In this transcendental eroticism, says De, 'the supersensuous Madhura-bhāva of the Gopis is different from the sensuous Kāma in the fact that the significance of the former consists entirely in contributing to the pleasure of its divine object, while the latter, as a mundane feeling, aims primarily at one's own pleasure'.<sup>88</sup> The only female among Krishna's companions to show any signs of such 'mundane feeling', that is, Kubjā who wanted to relate to him as an active partner, is roundly denounced, 'for her desire for sport was entirely for her own sensual pleasure, while that of the Gopis was exclusively intended for Kṛṣṇa'.<sup>89</sup>

In conformity to this mode, says Allchin, 'the soul of the devotee becomes a gopi in its relationship to Kṛṣṇa, and this calls for the envisaging of a change of sex in male devotees, who in this sentiment [i.e. rasa] become as it were the female consort of the God'.<sup>90</sup> If the male devotee could be transformed, out of Bhakti, into a gopi for the benefit of Kṛṣṇa's dalliance—and there are sects who cultivate this particular rasa more than the others<sup>91</sup>—why, one wonders, does the god himself, with all his love of play, never undergo a similar transformation for the benefit of his male devotees? The answer must be that even mythopoeia is subject to the morality of male dominance, and since a devotee is a subordinate by definition, even an erotic construction of his relation to the deity is necessarily postulated on the superordinate status of the latter.

Bhakti, in other words, is an ideology of subordination *par excellence*. All the inferior terms in any relationship of power structured as D/S within the Indian tradition, can be derived from it. This emerges with striking clarity from the rationalization of rasa theory by Jiva Goswami, the great theologian of Vaishnavism. He regrouped the five primary modalities, and their many variations into three, namely, 'Aśraya-bhakti, Dāsyā-bhakti, and Praśraya-bhakti, in which Kṛṣṇa appears respectively as the Pālaka (Protector),

<sup>87</sup> De, p. 379.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 398.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 379.

<sup>90</sup> Allchin, 'Introduction', p. 58.

<sup>91</sup> See Akshaykumar Datta's *Bharatbarshiya Upasak Sampradaya* (Calcutta, 1970) for some information on this point.

Prabhu (Master) and Lālaka (Superior Relative), and his devotee respectively as Pālyā (Subject), Dāsa (Servant) and Lālyā (Inferior Relative).<sup>92</sup> There is nothing in the nature of authority in pre-colonial India which is not comprehensively covered by these three dyads—Pālaka/Pālyā, Prabhu/Dāsa and Lālaka/Lālyā.

Bhakti may thus be said to have continued the political theories enunciated and elaborated over the centuries by the Dharmasastras and adapted them to the conditions of later feudalism. However, it did not derive subordination from *dāyanīti*—the principle of the big stick—which, in the Dharmasāstras, had made subalternity predicated on fear generated by the alliance between Kshatriya's brawn and Brahman's brain. On the contrary, those of its cults which were addressed to the religiosity of the lower strata of Hindu society, had it as their function to try and endear the dominant to the subordinate and assuage thereby the rigour of dāsyā for the latter. It was these that spiritualized the effort, fatigue and frustration involved in the labour and services offered by peasants, craftsmen and subaltern specialists to local elites, in the unacknowledged and unremunerated labour of women in domestic chores, in the work done by *kamin* for *jajman*, in the use-values produced by tenants as gifts, nazrana etc., for landlords, and so on. In all such instances, Bhakti conferred on the superordinate the sanctity of a deity or his surrogate, and translated dominance into the benign function of a pālaka, prabhu or lālaka (depending on the nature of the social relation and services involved) to whom the subordinate related as a devotee. Correspondingly, the latter's submission which rested, in the last resort, on the sanction of force, was made to appear as self-induced and voluntary—that is, as collaboration in short.

But that classical idiom of Indian politics was not made into an ingredient of C\* under the raj merely by the force of traditional religiosity among the subaltern masses unaffected by western-style education and liberal culture. Bhakti required a nineteenth-century Jiva Goswami to adapt it to the requirements of colonial rule, and Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay was the most eminent of all those intellectuals who came forward to step into that role. The tenth chapter of his celebrated treatise on religion, *Dharmatattva*, is a monument to his theoretical contribution in this respect.<sup>93</sup> Here, he

<sup>92</sup> De, p. 408.

<sup>93</sup> The source of my citations from this work is *Dharmatattva*, Ch. X, in *Bankim Rachanabali*, II, pp. 615–20 unless otherwise mentioned.

starts off with a reference to the five-rasa formula, but moves on from theology to sociology to characterize Bhakti as a principle of worldly authority:

Whoever is superior to us and benefits us by his superiority, is an object of Bhakti. The social uses of Bhakti are (1) that the inferior will never act as a follower of the superior unless there is Bhakti; (2) that unless the inferior follows the superior, there cannot be any unity (*aikya*) or cohesion (*bandhan*) in society, nor can it achieve any Improvement (*unnati*).

The contradictions involved in this attempt to match the feudal concept of Bhakti to the bourgeois notion of Improvement are more instructive for us than its failure as a sociological theory. For they are an authentic measure, apart from being an exemplar, of the difficulties of Indian liberalism to cope with the question of authority at a time when the codes which had hitherto been used to signal the latter were being inexorably modified. That modification meant, for Bankimchandra, a radical decline in Bhakti under the impact of colonialism: 'Look at the evils and disorder caused by the loss of Bhakti in our country. There had never been any want of Bhakti among the Hindus. Bhakti is one of the principal elements of Hindu religion and the Hindu shastras. But now Bhakti has completely disappeared from the community of those who are educated or only half-educated. They have failed to grasp the true significance of the western doctrine of egalitarianism (*sāmyabad*) and attributed to it the perverse meaning that people are equal everywhere in every sense, and hence no Bhakti is required of one person to another'. The consequence, according to him, was to turn family life into a hell, create discord in politics, make education harmful, perpetuate stagnation and disorder in society and 'fill the individual's soul with impurity and conceit'.

The remedy for these evils lay, of course, in the restoration of Bhakti. But no sooner does the author set out to prescribe how than it becomes clear that his formula deviates significantly from the traditional codes whose decline he laments so much. Thus, among the objects of Bhakti within the family he includes all those who figure in the traditional Hindu panel; but while in the latter, Bhakti is due from the wife to the husband and not the other way round, Bankimchandra makes it reciprocal. 'The husband is in every respect superior to the wife and hence the object of her Bhakti', he says. 'But according to Hindu religion, the wife, too, should be the object of

the husband's Bhakti, because it is laid down in that religion that the wife should be regarded as the image of Lakshmi (*lakshmirūpa*). However, on this subject, the tenets of the religion of Comte are more emphatic and deserving of respect than those of the religion of Hindus'.

By a second modification he makes Bhakti conditional on *gun*, in the sense of virtue or spiritual quality, rather than on *jati*, that is birth into any particular *varna* or caste. A Brahman wanting in the *gun* which is truly characteristic of his status merits no Bhakti, whereas 'we should address our Bhakti to a Sudra who has a Brahman's *gun*, that is, who is religious, learned, free of wordly desire (*nishkam*) and educates others [by example]'. 'A religious person, even if born of a lower caste, deserves Bhakti'. Thirdly, he makes a distinction between Bhakti for a royal person and that addressed to 'royalty as an institution. 'Think of a country without a king—that is, a republic, and you will understand that *rajbhakti* is not addressed to any particular human being. No member of the Congress of the United States or of the British Parliament may be an object of Bhakti, but Congress and Parliament are certainly so. In the same sense, Charles Stuart or Louis Capet might not have been deserving of Bhakti on the part of the inhabitants of those respective countries'. Quite clearly there is a deflection here from the classical meaning of *rajbhakti*: the word *raja* stands here for 'state' rather than 'king' as in the Dharmasāstras.

Finally, Bankimchandra specifies Samaj or society itself as an object of Bhakti, because, according to him, 'All the virtues of man are invested in the society which is our educator, law-giver, provider and protector in one—our sovereign, our teacher'. There is nothing like this, of course, in the Hindu tradition, and in making Samaj hypostatize thus for Krishna or any other godhead, the nineteenth-century theoretician turns sharply away from the theology of Jiva Goswami towards that of Auguste Comte. As he himself puts it, 'It is on the basis of an expansion of this thesis that Auguste Comte has recommended the worship of the Goddess of Humanity. No need therefore to elaborate further on this subject'.

But, for all its sophistications, this 'modernized' Bhakti was still unable to overcome the older tradition. This was so not only because western-style education and liberal values were so alien to the subaltern masses that they could hardly be expected to take much notice of such positivist-liberal modifications of their cherished be-

iefs. The reason, more importantly, was that these modifications did not go far enough to question the premises of traditional Bhakti. On the contrary, Bankimchandra's theory proceeded from those very premises. Thus, the family which he wanted to stop from degenerating into a hell, was still the old extended structure, complete indeed with guru and *purohit* (priest), where the order of dominance was much the same as prescribed in the classical Hindu code—that is, the parents' over children, guru's over *sishya*, the family priest's over the jajman, the elder's over the younger, and so on—except in the case of husband and wife where Bhakti was to be reciprocal.

But even there, reciprocity was derived not from any assumption of equality between the spouses. On the contrary, the husband was said to be superior to his wife 'in every respect' and as such, a proper object of her Bhakti. By contrast, her own claim to Bhakti was not based on any actual societal authority, but on a mythic construction after the image of the goddess Lakshmi. This carries so little conviction that the author himself invoked the authority of Comte rather than the Hindu shastras to justify his notion of reciprocity. Even more relevant for our discussion is the fact that this idea which dignifies *his theory of religion* to some extent is altogether ignored in the *discursive practice of his novels*. There, as in *Debi Chaudhurani* (by no means the only instance), the godliness of the husband is displayed in all its feudal sanctity: 'The Hindu law-givers knew the right answer. ... the husband provides the first step for accesss to God. That is why to a Hindu woman her husband is her god. In this respect, all other societies are inferior to Hindu society'; and 'Bhakti for the husband is the first stage of Bhakti for God'.<sup>94</sup>

Again, it is the weight of tradition which undermined Bankimchandra's thesis about *gun* rather than *jati* as the determinant of Bhakti. Whatever promise there was in this of a dynamic social mobility breaking down the barrier of caste and birth, came to nothing, if only because the necessity of the caste system and the Brahman's spiritual superiority within it was presumed in the argument. It was only by emulating the Brahman that the Sudra could become an object of Bhakti. In other words, Bhakti could do little to abolish the social distance between the high-born and the low-born, although some of the former's spiritual qualities might, under cer-

<sup>94</sup> *Bankim Rachanabali*, II, pp. 813, 814.

tain conditions, be acquired by the latter, without, however, effecting any change of place.

Finally, the constitutionalization of rajbhakti in this thesis is shown up as yet another shallow intellectualist construct in the light of what it has to say about the function and authority of the raja. Even assuming that raja here means *rashtra* (state), the polity that is depicted is indistinguishable from ancient Indian kingship in all essential respects. Thus, writes the author,

'The king stands at the head of the society just as the master stands at the head of his household and the parents [of their family]. Society owes its protection to his [king's] spiritual qualities, his powers to punish and his provisions (*tānhar pālane*). Just as the father is the object of his child's Bhakti, so is the king the object of Bhakti on the part of his *projas* ... Therefore, you must regard the king with Bhakti as the father of the society. Cultivate rajbhakti by such initiatives, festivals and other beneficial measures as have been witnessed recently in honour of Lord Ripon. Serve the king in war. Rajbhakti is commended over and over again in the religion of the Hindus ... There is no rajbhakti left in England any longer. It is still intact in Germany or Italy, where the kingdom (state) continues to improve.'

The emphasis put here on the patriarchal character of the monarchy or (to interpret it more generously) the state dissolves all constitutionalist and republican sentiments into a plea for submission to absolutism. Which shows how in spite of its attempt to forge an idiom to reconcile Western positivism, egalitarianism and humanism with the tradition of Bhakti, Indian liberalism reverts, at the end of the exercise, to a concept of collaboration framed primarily in terms of subordination characteristic of a pre-capitalist culture. That concept was to inform not only the naïve faith of the peasant soliciting protection from 'Mother' Victoria; it was also to figure in the abject loyalism of the panegyric, 'Loyalty Lotus', written for a visiting member of the British royal family by Bankimchandra's friend and eminent intellectual, Dinabandhu Mitra.<sup>95</sup>

#### *Rightful Dissent and Dharmic Protest*

R comes last. It comes after all the other elements of D and S because there can be no operation of D/S beyond it. For within any particular cycle of the historical reproduction of D/S, R works

<sup>95</sup> 'Loyalty Lotus arthat Rajbhakti Satadal' in *Dinabandhu Rachanabali* (Calcutta, 1967), pp. 437–8.

together with C\* either as an overtly articulate moment of contradiction or as a zero sign silently shadowing its Other, until it finally overcomes the latter, destroys S thereby and with it, all of that phase of D/S itself. The elimination of C\* by R thus signals the end of one round of struggle and the beginning of another. That point was of course never reached in Indian politics under the raj, so that S continued to be characterized, throughout the period, by the mutuality of its constituent elements. What made such mutuality possible was the fact that each of the elements understood the other's language, for its idioms, like those of the other, were drawn from the same traditions—British and Indian.

The British idiom of R was what may be called 'Rightful Dissent'. It informed a wide variety of protest in forms unknown to our politics of the pre-colonial period. Some of its examples would be found in the assemblies, marches, lobbies, etc., organized by mass associations under leaderships elected according to parliamentary or quasi-parliamentary democratic procedures (e.g. voting). The association of the labouring populations of town and country in trade unions, kisan sabhas, etc., strikes and other struggles for the satisfaction of demands for wages, employment, better living conditions and civil liberties, and the mobilization of the subaltern in the organized sectors of nationalist politics by the Congress and other parties, were also instances of this idiom at work.

There was an awareness, in this idiom, of the legal and constitutional limits imposed by the colonial authorities on its articulation; and it contained itself, most of the time, within those limits, acquiring thus a peaceable aspect which was systematically misrepresented, abused and exploited both by the foreign and indigenous elites—misrepresented by the British rulers as evidence of an ingrained 'national' cowardice; abused by the Congress leadership in order to stop popular militancy from 'going too far' in the nationalist movement, and by the leadership of parties on the left to stop class struggle from boiling over into armed conflict (e.g. by the communist leadership during the Tebhaga struggles); exploited ideologically by Gandhism in its doctrine of non-violence and organizationally by the Congress party everywhere to keep the masses under its control. Yet, protest of this kind did not always keep to the path of peaceful expression, as witness the violence of revolutionary terrorism and, on a larger scale, that of the numerous mass struggles against imperialism and the indigenous oppressors.

This idiom owes nothing to any Indian tradition. In its concept it derives directly from that important current of English liberalism which, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, relied on the example of the Revolution of 1688 and its 'theoretical equivalent' (as Halévy put it), the idea of natural rights based on an original contract, as propounded by John Locke. According to the latter, 'all men in the state of nature are free and equal, and if the right of liberty of any one man, a right which belongs to all equally, be violated, then, in the state of nature, every individual has the right to punish'. It is in order to prevent this right from being abused by war that people alienated it in favour of a contract and formed a civil society based on the law of majorities and the governors' responsibility to the governed. 'If, therefore, the governors violate the contract, the governed must have recourse to insurrection, to "resistance"'. The Revolution of 1688 was justified by the fact that James II 'had violated the condition of the pact which bound him to his subjects'. Indeed, that revolution made the English government 'the one legitimate government in the whole of Europe, the one government which is based on a contract whose date can be historically fixed, and which by its very existence makes sacred the "right of resistance"'.<sup>96</sup>

Much of the democratic movement in England in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries involving such momentous issues as those of civil liberty and parliamentary reform was inspired by these ideas. Since the conquest and consolidation of the Indian empire were contemporary to these ideas, some of these filtered through the media and institutions of an English-style education and the political culture of the raj to the Indian elite, the principal beneficiaries of that education and culture. The result was a curious paradox. While the colonial regime, which had itself introduced among its subjects the notion of right and liberties, went on denying these in full or in part in the principles and practice of its government, the disenfranchized subjects went on pressing the rulers to match their administration to their own ideals. Ironically, therefore, a large part of the politics of protest under the raj, especially when initiated by the educated middle-class leaderships, turned on the 'un-British' character of British rule—a theme made famous by successive generations of Indian liberals from Naoroji to Gandhi. They had taken

<sup>96</sup> Halévy, pp. 130–1, 136.

the 'sacred' English idiom of Rightful Dissent too seriously for the regime's comfort.

But Rightful Dissent was not all that was there to R. There was also a purely Indian idiom at work in it. Since this was not informed by the concept of right but of Dharma, we shall call it 'Dharmic Protest'. It was manifested in some of the most dramatic forms of popular protest throughout the colonial period—in peasant uprisings variously called *hool*, *dhing*, *bidroha*, *hangama*, *fituri*, etc.; in *hizrat* or desertion *en masse* of peasants or other labouring people (e.g. miners during the Santal Hool of 1855, Assam tea plantation workers during the Non-Co-operation movement, etc.); in *dharna* or protest by sitting down in the offender's presence with the pledge not to move until the redress of grievance; in *hartal* or the general suspension of public activity; in *dharmaghat* or withdrawal of labour; in *jat mara*, or measures to destroy the offender's caste by refusal to render such specialist services as are required to insure him and his kin against pollution; in *danga* or sectarian, ethnic, caste and class violence involving large bodies of the subaltern population, etc.

All these have Indian names (with many equivalents in other languages of the subcontinent than those I have used) and they all derive from a pre-colonial tradition. But it is not temporal precedence alone that distinguishes them from dissent framed in the English idiom. What puts them apart from the latter is *the absence of any notion of right*. They do not derive from what were regarded as 'self-evident truths' in the American Declaration of Rights, namely, 'that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.'<sup>97</sup> Quite clearly, all men are not created equal in a society ordered in a hierarchy of castes. Far from being endowed with 'certain inalienable rights', they are endowed, by the fact of their birth into one caste or another, with inflexible duties prescribed by the shastras and by custom. Life, liberty and happiness are not theirs by right, but accrue to them, when they do, by the benevolence of governments. The latter are instituted among

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

men by God and derive their powers not 'from the consent of the governed' but from the sanction of Dānda, son of God.

What, then, does such protest derive from, if not from a sense of right? It derives from the righteousness of the defence of Dharma, or to emphasize more precisely the negative aspect of resistance—from the morality of struggle against adharma. Now, the ruler's Dharma, *rājdharma*, insists that the king must protect his subjects.<sup>98</sup> This is so basic that the primeval King Pṛthu, who incarnated Vishṇu himself and served as a model for all subsequent rulers on earth, is depicted in the *Mahābhārata* as 'the one who protects the earth and her inhabitants'.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, the king's failure in his protective function amounts to the most serious violation of Dharma, and leads to the destruction both of himself and his subjects.<sup>100</sup> The latter are, therefore, advised—in the *Sāntiparva* (57.43–44) of the 'Mahabharata—to abandon him 'like a leaky boat on the sea'. But the *Anuśāsanaparva* (6.132–33) goes further and calls for regicide as the subjects' duty to redress the adharma arising from the king's failure to protect them. Thus,

The subjects should arm themselves for killing that king who does not protect them [who simply plunders their riches, who confounds all distinctions, who is incapable of taking their lead, who is without mercy, and who is considered as the most sinful of kings.]

That king who tells his people that he is their protector but who does not or is unable to protect them, should be killed by his subjects in a body like a dog that is affected with the rabies and has become mad.

There is nothing in this prescription for violence against rulers by the ruled that is postulated on the latter's rights. As subjects in a polity devoid of any notion of citizenship, they have no rights, but only duties. The duty enjoined upon them is merely to undo the adharma involved in a lapse of *rājdharma*, so that the transcendental constitution of Dharma, in which the king serves as an executive, can be affirmed again. Translated into the politics of resistance under the *raj* this implied an effort to correct what appeared to Indians as its deviation from the ideals of government inspired by Dharma. The values informing that resistance were therefore

<sup>98</sup> *Mahābhārata*: *Sāntiparva*, 57.41. References to this work in this paragraph are to the English translations by Manmatha Nath Dutt, published as *The Mahābhārata: Shānti Parva* (Calcutta, 1903), and *Ibid: Anuśāsanaparva* (Calcutta, 1905).

<sup>99</sup> Gonda, p. 130.

<sup>100</sup> *Mahābhārata*: *Sāntiparva*, 90.39.

charged with religiosity: *vichāra* suggested a sort of providential justice that had nothing to do with the Englishman's rule of law; *nyāya* meant broadly a legitimacy conforming to the ethics of Dharma, far removed from secular political morality in any modern sense.

Dharmic Protest remained, therefore, as one of the most incalculable factors of politics under colonial rule. The notions of authority, obligation, right and wrong implied in it referred to the traditions of a pre-colonial past which the rulers never managed fully to explore, and to those primordial aspects of community and religion which they neither understood nor sympathized with. This is demonstrated, among other things, in the consistency with which the official mind went on, throughout the entire period, to misread and misinterpret the elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in which Dharmic Protest was more amply and more explicitly manifested than in any other form.

What made this idiom of R also so difficult to comprehend and control was its plasticity and volatility. Its plasticity tempted the liberal elite to try and appropriate it to their political philosophies—e.g. Bankimchandra to his Anusilandharma as he sought to marry the Western concept of right to the Hindu idea of spiritually legitimized dissent, and Gandhi to his theory of satyagraha where (as in his writings between the Rowlatt Satyagraha and the end of the first Non-Co-operation Movement) the Western liberal notions of liberty and citizenship were grafted on the Hindu ideology of Dharma, identified as 'satya'. In the event, Bankimchandra's theory lost its attraction for the elite to whom it was addressed. Gandhi's less intellectualist construct proved to be more successful precisely because of its eclecticism and its inconsistency. Yet neither the one nor the other really came to terms with subaltern resistance in its dharmic idiom. The volatility of the latter was something which no liberal-Hindu or liberal-nationalist formula could fully comprehend. Bankimchandra took fright at the Pabna *projabidroha* of 1873; Gandhi did so at every protest, however dharmic, that involved violence: he had obviously not reckoned with the fact that the authority of the *Anuśāsanaparava* was still strong among the masses—stronger, on some occasions, than the authority of satyagraha theory itself.

### III. DOMINANCE WITHOUT HEGEMONY: THE COLONIALIST MOMENT

#### *Overdeterminations*

It should be clear from what has been said so far that D/S is a relation constituted by elements which derive their idioms from two very different paradigms of political culture (Figure 2)—one of which is contemporary, British and liberal, and the other pre-colonial, Indian and semi-feudal. To put it schematically, one could say that the relation between D and S, that is, between (C, P) and (C\*, R), is a relation between two matrices, namely {Order, Improvement, Obedience, Rightful Dissent} and {Danda, Dharma, Bhakti, Dharmic Protest}.

FIGURE 2. *Paradigmatic Derivation of Political Idioms*

Paradigms		
Constituent Elements	Contemporary; British; Liberal	Pre-colonial; Indian; Semi-feudal
C	Order	Danda
P	Improvement	Dharma
C*	Obedience	Bhakti
R	Rightful Dissent	Dharmic Protest

The ordering of these idioms for discursive purposes is of course not quite the same thing as it is in the actual practice of politics. In the latter, each particular instance acquires its specificity from the braiding, collapsing, echoing and blending of these idioms in such a way as to baffle all description of this process merely as an interaction between a dynamic modernity and an inert tradition, or as the mechanical stapling of a classical Western liberalism to an unchanging Eastern feudal culture. The shallowness of the first of these metaphors has been exposed well enough to require no further discussion. Its popularity has declined with the end of the developmental illusions generated by post-war capitalism to 'modernize' an archaic Third World. But the power of the other metaphor is still intact and calls for some comment.

I think that we should be extremely careful to avoid, in our own work, the mechanistic implications of that metaphor. We can do so

only by emphasizing that the interplay of the paradigmatic derivatives of D and S in the politics of the colonial period is *in no sense* a matter of simple aggregation, but that, on the contrary, those derivatives, functioning as they do as reagents, fashion each of the constituent elements into an original compound, a new entity. *Consequently, as a new and original entity, none of the elements is a replica of its corresponding idiom in either of the paradigms.* Thus, C as an element of D/S is not identical with the notion of Order in the lexicon of eighteenth-and nineteenth-century British politics nor with the notion of Daṇḍa in that of classical Hindu polity, although its formation owes much to both. Again, P, though a product of the interaction of Improvement and Dharma, is characterized by properties only some of which it shares with those idioms, while the rest are uniquely its own. And so on for each element. In other words, what makes the relation of D and S *specific and adequate to the conditions of colonialism* is an ensemble of overdetermining effects constituted by what Lacan, in his interpretation of that key Freudian concept,<sup>101</sup> has called 'a double meaning', with each political instance standing at the same time for 'a conflict long dead' and 'a present conflict'—that is, for that process of condensation and displacement by which the ideological moments of social contradictions in pre-colonial India and modern England were fused with those of the living contradictions of colonial rule to structure the relation D/S.

In this sense, there is nothing in our political culture of the colonial period that is not an outcome of this process of overdetermination. That outcome, in its phenomenal form, is a tissue of paradoxes. Whatever is indigenous in that culture is all borrowed from the past, whatever is foreign is contemporary. The element of the past, though dead, is not defunct. The contemporary element, so vigorous in its native metropolitan soil, finds it difficult to strike roots as a graft and remains shallow and restricted in its penetration of the new site. *The originality of our politics of the period lies precisely in such paradoxes* which pervade the entire spectrum of power relations.

These are displayed, on the side of the colonizers, in the spectacle of a Mother of Parliament presiding happily over a state without

<sup>101</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis' in *Écrits* (London, 1980), p. 59.

citizenship; in a vision of Improvement on capitalist lines degenerating in practice into a neo-feudal organization of property; in a liberal education designed deliberately to perpetuate the subjects' loyalty to an autocratic regime, etc.; and other attitudes and policies of the same order which, taken together, gave British colonialism in India its character.

On the side of the indigenous elite, we have an emergent capitalist class keen on masking its role as buyer and user of labour power by pretensions of trusteeship with regard to the labour force; a political leadership of the bourgeoisie resolute in its defence of landlordism; an intelligentsia devoted to social reform in public life and feudal values in private; liberal minds insisting on the 'rationality' of *santa-tan* Hinduism; critics of the raj concerned to restrict criticism to administrative matters alone and avow their loyalty towards the colonial state itself with the utmost enthusiasm; a nationalist imagination dreaming up the nation-state of the future as a Hindu Samrajya or a Ramrajya, and so on.

And one need not probe too far to discern the play of paradoxes on the subaltern side as well in a peasant rebel's vision of God as a white man who writes like a court clerk; in lower-caste attempts to move upwards by emulating the conservatism of the upper castes; in a working-class struggle for better wages carried out as a campaign for Truth; in revolts against pre-capitalist property relations calling out for support from the regime which insists, by law and administrative measures, on perpetuating those very relations, and a myriad of other contradictions of that kind.

### *Colonialism as the Failure of a Universalist Project*

The most important and for us the most instructive of all the paradoxes is *the co-existence of two paradigms as the determinant of political culture*. Its importance lies not so much in the fact that it is the *central paradox* which sired all the others, but that it stands for a historical deviation which defines the character of colonialism itself. For the question that calls for an answer is: why two paradigms and not just one? Why did the establishment of British paramountcy over the subcontinent fail to overcome the resistance of indigenous Indian culture to the point of being forced into a symbiosis? Why did the universalist drive of the world's most advanced capitalist culture, a phenomenon that corresponded to the universalizing tendency of the most dynamic capital of the time, fail, in the Indian

instance, to match the strength and fullness of its political dominion over a subject people by assimilating, if not abolishing, the pre-capitalist culture of the latter? For it is that drive which, as Marx argues in *The German Ideology*, makes the emergence of 'ruling ideas' a necessary concomitant of capital's dominance in the mode of production, and it is precisely these 'ruling ideas' which assign to the bourgeoisie the historic responsibility to 'represent' the rest of society, to speak for the nation, and thereby invest itself with hegemony.

Until the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie no other class had ever been called upon to act in this role, because no pre-capitalist mode of production was characterized by the same universalizing urge. As a result, conquistadors, kings and barons were content to rule over subjugated populations without integrating or assimilating the latter's culture into a hegemonic ruling culture. On the contrary, as the eighteenth-century *philosophes* went on insisting (e.g. Voltaire in his essay, *Fragments sur l'Inde*, and his play *L'Orphelin de la Chine*), some of these conquerors had been eager to try and accommodate the culture of their subjects. The despotic state was, in this sense, the reverse of the bourgeois state. The despot, wrote Montesquieu, governed by fear—a measure of his distance from the objects of governance.<sup>102</sup> That distance was mediated by no 'education' at all,<sup>103</sup> that is, no persuasion involving any exchange at the level of culture: all that despotism required was total subordination and all that changed hands was tribute. It did not have a ruling culture, although there was a ruler's culture operating side by side with that of the ruled in a state of mutual indifference, if not mutual acceptance in all cases.

One can, therefore, understand the tolerance, even a certain admiration, for Indian culture on the part of the first colonizers who, in the epoch of Warren Hastings and the Fort William College, were still imbued with the spirit of conquest and mercantilist adventure. But how is it that even after British capital, powered by industrialism, had come of age and the culture corresponding to it had created a homogeneous space for itself by overcoming the resistance of all that was parochial and particularistic in metropolitan

<sup>102</sup> Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des Lois*, t. 1, 1.3:9, 10 (Editions Garnier, Paris, n.d.), pp. 31–3.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 1.4:3, pp. 37–8.

politics—how is it that even at its hour of triumph the universalist tendency was resigned to live at peace with the heterogeneity and particularity of the indigenous political culture of an Asian colony? How come that in India universalism failed to generate a hegemonic ruling culture like what it had done at home?

The answer simply is that colonialism could continue as a relation of power in the subcontinent *only on the condition* that the colonizing bourgeoisie should fail to live up to its own universalist project. The nature of the state it had created by the sword made this historically necessary. The colonial state in India did not originate from the activity of Indian society itself. No moment of that society's internal dynamics was involved in the imposition of the alien authority structure which provided the process of state formation both with its primary impulse and the means of its actualization. In other words, the alienation which, in the career of the *non-colonial state*, comes *after* its emergence from civil society and is expressed in its separation from the latter in order to stand above it, was *already there*—a foreign intrusion into the indigenous society—at the very inception of the British-Indian colonial state. The latter was thus doubly alienated—in becoming as well as in being.

As an *absolute externality*, it was *structured like a despotism*, with no mediating depths, no space provided for a transaction between the will of the rulers and that of the ruled, in short, a polity where, as Montesquieu wrote of its ancient and medieval precursor, 'Il n'y a point de tempérament, de modifications, d'accommodements, de termes, d'équivalents, de pourparlers, de remontrances; rien d'égal ou de meilleur, à proposer; l'homme est une créature qui obéit à une créature qui veut'.<sup>104</sup> That *immediacy* returned, long after its time, to inform a historic décalage—the insertion of the most dynamic power of the contemporary world into the power relations of a world still living in the past. As an anachronism, this was in agreement with the paradox of an advanced bourgeois culture regressing from its universalist drive to a compromise with precapitalist particularism under colonial conditions of its own creation. An 'unconscious tool of history' had obviously lost its edge and was consigned by history to the company of other blunt instruments in its bottom drawer.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 1.3:10, p. 32.

That immediacy proved to be an essential factor both in the constitution of dominance and in the construction of the political domain. *Its effect on the organic composition of D was to undermine the magnitude of P in relation to that of C within the moment of colonialism.* In other words, *D as a term of the central relation of power in the subcontinent, meant Dominance without hegemony.*<sup>105</sup> The Prince who, on the Centaur's advice, had so deftly balanced the beastly and the humane in politics for over four centuries, appears to have lost his touch, and the exercise of authority in realms far from metropolitan Europe came to rely on fear rather than consent.

The primacy of C in the organic composition of D made Order a more decisive idiom than Improvement in the authority of the colonialist elite. The efforts of the 'Improvers' amongst them, such as Cornwallis and Bentinck, had failed to develop a strategy of persuasion effective enough to overcome the sense of isolation that haunted the regime, a sense in which the alien character of the state was more amply documented than anything else. This failure is clearly demonstrated by the aggressive, militarist and autocratic nature of the administration for the *greater part of British rule, until nearly the end of the nineteenth century, when militarism ended, but did so without changing the character of the raj as an autocracy.* This was so obvious as to make even a blatant apologist for the empire like Dodwell take notice of 'the despotic form of Government maintained by the English in India' and speak of his compatriots in the subcontinent as 'English despots'.<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless, this guru of colonialist historiography was true to himself as he wrote, at the same time, of 'the rule of law, which the English Government had succeeded in establishing', a 'rule of law ... replacing the rule of force as the basis of the state' in the post-Mutiny period.<sup>107</sup>

But what rule of law? What rule of law where the law did not even remotely issue from the will of the people; where Indians, denied the right to vote for most of the duration of British rule, were allowed, during its last thirty years, only a restricted franchise

<sup>105</sup> As we have already said earlier, the word 'hegemony', in our use of the word in this essay, stands for *conditions of Dominance (D), such that, in the organic composition of the latter, Persuasion (P) outweighs Coercion (C).*

<sup>106</sup> Henry Dodwell, *A Sketch of the History of India* (London, 1925), pp. 12, 13, 221.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 221, 248.

which took decades of struggle and incalculable amounts of physical and spiritual pain to increase, between the Act of 1919 and the Act of 1935, from (an inflated estimate of) three per cent of the adult population to fourteen per cent? What rule of law where the 'law', during the first hundred years of the raj (out of a total of one hundred and ninety), was merely a body of executive orders, decrees, regulations; where, during the next three quarters of a century, all legislative institutions at the central and provincial levels of government were composed either entirely of officials and official nominees or the latter supplemented, for a relatively short period at the height of British constitutionalist magnanimity, by a handful of Indians elected on the basis of restricted franchise? What rule of law where even the devolution of power, promoted by the Act of 1935 to its highest permissible degree, left all strategic decisions for the governance of the country as a whole to a central executive made up of a Viceroy nominated by Whitehall, his own nominees recruited from the colonial bureaucracy and a hand-picked minority of pliant Indians and Europeans? What rule of law where the execution of the laws, made for the people but not by them, was so often characterized by double standards—one, until the end of the nineteenth century, for the whites and the other for the natives, and during the remainder of British rule, one for the administrative elite, British and Indian, and the other for the rest of the population?

Questions such as these lead to yet another question which is no less important: how come that a knowledgeable historian like Doddwell and indeed many other knowledgeable British intellectuals, bureaucrats and politicians could go on talking about a rule of law in colonial India when the facts of colonialist practice did nothing to support such assertion? The answer, I think, lies in the pervasive power of the ideology of law in English political thought. It derives from the long standing of the British legal system and its proven superiority to all other historically evolved systems of the same order up to the age of capital. 'Rule of law' is the name given by the common sense of politics to that ideology. As an amalgam of the institutional and conceptual aspects of that system, it has come to acquire the status of a code mediating all perceptions of civil conflict. Consequently, there is nothing in the configuration of power that is not referred to and expressed by this code. It stands thus for that universalist urge of bourgeois culture which has realized itself so much and so well in the theory and practice of law under metro-

politan conditions as to assume the status of 'a cultural achievement of universal significance' in the eyes not only of English liberals and colonialists like Dodwell, but also, alas, of English radicals like E. P. Thompson from whom those words are taken.<sup>108</sup>

It is indeed a tribute to the hallucinatory effects of ideology that a particularistic cultural achievement of the bourgeoisie should appear as one of 'universal significance' both to the friends and foes of that class. However, neither the special pleading by Dodwell when he speaks of a rule of law following a rule of force in the post-Mutiny period, nor the ingenuity of Thompson when he tries unsuccessfully to disentangle himself from the metaphysical implications of his statement by allowing for the class manipulation of the rule of law,<sup>109</sup> can take away from the fact that *bourgeois culture hits its historical limit in colonialism*. None of its noble achievements—Liberalism, Democracy, Liberty, Rule of Law, etc.—can survive the inexorable urge of capital to expand and reproduce itself by means of the politics of extra-territorial, colonial dominance. Colonialism stands thus not merely for the historical progeny, *ātmaja*, of industrial and finance capital, but also for its historic Other.

There were some Indian liberals on whom that illusion had little or no effect. They were among the more advanced elements of the intelligentsia. They had acquired, by education, an understanding of the rule of law as an ideal, but knew from their own experience, as the colonized, that it did not work in colonialist practice. In this knowledge, they differed from the mass of their 'uneducated' compatriots who had not yet learnt to evaluate the performance of the Sarkar by that alien norm. But they also differed from their opposite numbers in England. For, unlike them, the Indian liberal was not born to a tradition imbued with the ideology of a rule of law, nor was the latter a code used by him *systematically* to think and express his notions of power. He was, therefore, quick to notice the distortion of that code in the governance of the raj and interpret it as a telling difference between English doctrine and 'Anglo-Indian' deed. In this clash of perceptions between the liberal as the coloniz-

<sup>108</sup> E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters* (London, 1975), p. 265.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., pp. 258–69 *passim*; especially, pp. 265–7.

er and the liberal as the colonized, we have yet another demonstration of the parallax of power: since the dominant's angle of vision must differ from that of the dominated in any observation of the phenomenon D by both, there must always be two rather different images of that phenomenon obtained from such observation.

It is not surprising therefore that Dodwell's view of the rule of law in India should differ radically from the view taken of the raj by two representative Indian liberals. One of them, Rabindranath Tagore, turns to this theme again and again in a series of essays between 1893 and 1903.<sup>110</sup> He writes of the illusions of the first liberals:

We had just graduated and undertaken to translate such foreign phrases as equality, liberty, fraternity, etc., into Bengali. We thought that Europe, with all its physical prowess, acknowledged the weak as its equal in terms of human right. We, the recent graduates, were absolutely overwhelmed and looked upon them as gods whom we could go on worshipping for all time and who would go on helping us for ever with their beneficence ...<sup>111</sup>

But such sentiments proved wrong. The British were quick to demonstrate that they would not treat Indians as equals. Tagore cites instances of racist arrogance on the part of the whites in social transactions with the natives and of racial discrimination on the part of the regime in the judicial and other areas of public administration.<sup>112</sup> He accuses the English of acting on the basis of a 'split' (*dvikhaṇḍita*) morality,

so that they find it very difficult indeed to come to a fair judgement in cases of dispute between their own compatriots and others. For it is not improbable that an Englishman who would not hesitate to try and reduce the Indian population by punching, kicking or shooting without any provocation at all, would still be considered as innocent as a lamb by his own community. Consequently, he is not regarded by the English as guilty of murder in quite the same way as a native murderer would be. To sentence such a man to death by hanging could therefore be considered by them as legal murder.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>110</sup> The five essays in this series used for the present argument are 'Ingrajer Atamka' (1300), 'Raja O Proja' (1301), 'Prasanga Katha' (1305), 'Rajkutumba' (1310), and 'Ghushaghushi' (1310). The figures in parenthesis indicate dates of publication according to the Bengali calendar. Our citations are all from *Rabindra-rachanabali*, XII: 838–68, 887–97.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 888.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 850–1, 856, 857.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 856.

And, again,

It is quite easy for an Englishman to hit an Indian—and that, not merely because he is physically strong ... This is because, in this case, I am merely an individual, while he, an Englishman, stands for the power of the state. In a court of law, I shall be judged as an ordinary mortal and he as an Englishman. And if I hit an Englishman, the judge would consider it as an attack on the authority of the state, as undermining English prestige. As a result, I cannot be tried for anything as simple as common assault.<sup>114</sup>

As Tagore was about to publish the first of this series of articles 'speaking bitterness' in 1893, Gandhi too was about to launch on his political career in South Africa. There he was quick to notice—indeed, was forced to notice—how professions of bourgeois democracy were violated in the practice of imperialism. 'My public life began in 1893 in South Africa in troubled weather', he recalled at his trial at the end of the Non-Co-operation Movement nearly thirty years later. 'My first contact with British authority in that country was not of a happy character. I discovered that as a man and an Indian I had no rights. More correctly, I discovered that I had no rights as a man because I was an Indian.'<sup>115</sup>

However, unlike Tagore whom the arrogance of the rulers had already transformed from a loyalist liberal into a nationalist critic of the raj, Gandhi was to take his time before losing his illusions. For the next twenty years or so he would still be ready to grant British imperialism the benefit of doubt and explain away white racism in South Africa as 'an excrescence upon a system that was intrinsically and mainly good'.<sup>116</sup> But the system finally lost its standing with him after the Jalianwalabagh atrocities and the blatant manner in which these were condoned by the colonial authorities both in India and England. 'The Punjab crime was white-washed and most culprits went not only unpunished, but remained in service and some continued to draw pensions from the Indian revenue, and in some cases were even rewarded'.<sup>117</sup> So Gandhi who had already described the Rowlatt Act as 'a law designed to rob the people of all real freedom', went on to denounce 'the law itself in this country' as 'used to serve the foreign exploiter' and as 'prostituted consciously or un-

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 892.

<sup>115</sup> CWMG, vol. xxiii (Ahmedabad, 1967), p. 115. <sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

consciously for the benefit of the exploiter'.<sup>118</sup>

So much for Dodwell's 'rule of law' in colonial India! So much for its standing as 'a cultural achievement of universal significance'! Quite clearly its 'universality' was not obvious even to such liberals among the subjugated people, who, by their own admission, had started off with a good deal of faith in it. Gandhi spoke of the conceit and self-deception of the colonialists and their native collaborators in this respect thus:

The greatest misfortune is that Englishmen and their Indian associates in the administration of the country do not know that they are engaged in the crime [of using the law for the purposes of colonial exploitation] I have attempted to describe. I am satisfied that many English and Indian officials honestly believe that they are administering one of the best systems devised in the world and that India is making steady though slow progress. They do not know that a subtle but effective *system of terrorism* and an *organized display of force* on the one hand, and the deprivation of all powers of realisation or self-defence on the other, have emasculated the people and induced in them the habit of simulation. This awful habit has added to the ignorance and the self-deception of the administrators.<sup>119</sup>

Tagore's critique went even further. He attributed the defects of the system not so much to 'the ignorance and the self-deception of the administrators' as to the limitations of English bourgeois culture itself. If the 'Anglo-Indians' (a nineteenth-century term for all Britons living and working in India) ignored in their conduct all those liberal norms and democratic ideals they cherished in their metropolitan culture, said Tagore, it was because they had systematized the sense of Western superiority with regard to the peoples of the East into a political philosophy based on the theories of Herbert Spencer and others. According to those theories, the laws of evolution required an adjustment of political and moral principles to the level of any given civilization, so that the application of the more advanced Western principles to the relatively backward and very different non-Western societies could be harmful for their well-being and bring discredit upon the civilizing agents themselves. 'The point I want to make', wrote Tagore, 'is that an idea is fast gaining ground in India as well as in England itself that European principles are meant for Europe alone. Indians are so very different that the principles of civilization are not fully suitable for their

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., pp. 117–18. Emphasis added.

needs'. Thus, even the most eminent of Indian liberals—one who believed in the universality of culture more than any other of his contemporaries—was not deceived by the universalist claim of English liberalism. On the contrary, he identified it as a cultural dialect's pretension to the status of a universal language.

What such pretension meant, in colonialist practice, was to put an assumption of European superiority at the very core of the governance of India. It meant distancing the governors from the governed and generating among the former a fear of isolation of which Cornwallis and Bentinck had warned, and which their successors now sought to overcome by a display of force. British rule, wrote Tagore in despair, seemed not to recognize that it was good 'both for the realm and the rulers that the administration should be as free of conflict and antagonism as possible'. He referred to Kipling's imagery of India as a zoo where the natives had to be kept under control by the whip, combined with 'a promise of bones for food and even a little affection that was owing to pets'. But it would be disastrous to introduce 'ethics, friendship, civilization, etc, into this treatment, for that might endanger the life of the keeper himself.' Colonial rule, he concluded, was 'a blend of cruelty and haughty assertion of force'.

According to this perception, Dodwell's rule of law had evidently not arrived even thirty years after the Mutiny. Nor was it yet in sight thirty years later when, as noticed above, Gandhi thought it fit to describe the regime as an 'effective system of terrorism and an organized display of force'. Thus, in the estimate of even the most 'reasonable' Indians, *colonialism amounted to a Dominance without hegemony*—that is, to D with its organic composition seriously undermined by the dilution of the element P. Nothing could testify more to the failure of metropolitan bourgeois culture to inform the structure of authority in the subcontinental colony fully by its own content.

#### *The Fabrication of a Spurious Hegemony*

One of the consequences of that failure has been to inhibit the homogenization of the domain of politics. For, under conditions of dominance without hegemony, the life of civil society can never be fully absorbed into the activity of the state. That is why pre-capitalist politics, in which dominance neither solicits nor acquires hegemony, are usually characterized by the coexistence of several

cultures of which the culture of the ruling group is only one, even if the strongest, among others. Thus, as Kosambi tells us, during the long era of Indian feudalism, cultural modes characteristic of the latter had to learn to live with those of the historically precedent but still active hunting and foodgathering social formations. What is equally important is that this compromise was rationalized by the dominant culture in such a way as to give it the appearance of a universal, eternal, or some other supra-historical phenomenon or entity. The triumphant Brahmanical culture of later feudalism would therefore inscribe the pastoral, Vedic *yajña* into the Dharmasāstras as a timeless tradition, adopt a myriad of primitive local deities and refashion them after the images of a supra-local Hindu pantheon, and everywhere 'the Brahmin would write *purāṇas* to make aboriginal rites respectable'.<sup>120</sup>

Even the bourgeoisie, in the course of their striving for dominance in Western Europe, would make a virtue of accommodating its rivals by ideological ploys of the same kind: 'for instance, in an age and in a country where royal power, aristocracy and bourgeoisie are contending for domination and where, therefore, domination is shared, the doctrine of powers proves to be the dominant idea and is expressed as an "eternal law".'<sup>121</sup> In those words, the authors of *The German Ideology* noticed how an ascending but still immature bourgeoisie had tried, a hundred years ago, to make its failure to achieve paramountcy appear as a constitutional principle valid for all time. From our own position in the penultimate decade of the twentieth century, it is possible now to look back on the same bourgeoisie which, having come of age, had established its hegemonic dominance in metropolitan Europe and expanded into a colonial empire only to realize that its rule over its Asian subjects must rely, alas, more on force than consent. Consequently, in its attempt to disguise its failure to make dominance informed by hegemony in its colonial project it had recourse again to that well-tried universalist trick.

But there was a difference this time. Unlike in the earlier phase, universalism was no longer a signal of real advance, but merely a gesture in the direction of a past triumph. It was a nostalgia that fed

<sup>120</sup> Kosambi, p. 51.

<sup>121</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. v (London, 1976), p. 59. [Hereafter, *MECW*].

on the historic achievement of the bourgeoisie in its youth when by acting for its particular interest it could still be regarded as acting for the general interest, and when the nation-state, put to use as an instrument of the will of its own class, could still appear as if it was being used as an instrument of people's will. In other words, although the moment of glory had passed, the heady sense of dominance blessed with hegemony lingered on and was transformed, by reflection, into a universal, almost transcendental, attribute of bourgeois power valid for all time and everywhere. From that abstraction, it was but one short step to conceptualizing its last historic 'achievement', that is, colonialism, too, as hegemonic.

It was *historiography* which, more than any other bourgeois knowledge, contributed to the fabrication of this spurious hegemony. 'It is the state which first supplies a content', said Hegel, 'which not only lends itself to the prose of history but actually helps to produce it'.<sup>122</sup> The truth of this observation is fully confirmed by the complicity between the formation of a colonial state in India and the production of colonialist histories of the raj. The latter fall roughly into two classes of writing. The first corresponds to the initial, mercantilist phase of British power in the subcontinent. Phrased in the idiom of coercion, it emphasizes the moment of conquest rather than order. Alexander Dow, 'Lieutenant-Colonel in the Company's Service', testified truly to the inspiration derived from the sword by the pen in this particular genre as he dedicated one of its most representative specimens, *The History of Hindostan*, to the King of England, thus: 'The success of your Majesty's arms has laid open the East to the researches of the curious'.<sup>123</sup> The works of many other writers of the period—Verelst, Bolts, Srafton, Grant, etc.—to name some of the better known amongst them—are witness to this explicit collaboration between arms and researches. They refute, in anticipation, the attempt that was to be made later on by many a pundit to represent British historiography as a curricular effort to educate Indians in liberal values. For the aim of mercantilist historiography was simply to educate the East India Company. By investigating the relation between government and landed property in the pre-colonial period it wanted to equip the Company with a

<sup>122</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction: Reason in History* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 136.

<sup>123</sup> Alexander Dow, *The History of Hindostan*, Vol. I. (3rd Edition; London, 1792), p. i. Emphasis added.

knowledge that would help it to extract the highest possible amount of revenue from the conquered territories and use it to finance its seaborne trade.

Most of these writers were quite candid about their political motivation, as witness the administrative prescriptions which figured so prominently in every exercise of this kind. The concentration, in such writing, on the coercive element of dominance also makes for an objectivity rarely found in the colonialist discourse of later generations. Unaffected yet by the idiom of Improvement, hence unconcerned to promote any affection among the conquerors for the conquered, it maintains a considerable distance from the latter. In that perspective the physical features of the land acquired by the sword show up as clearly as the details of the religion, customs, manners, etc. of the people subjugated by the sword. For, in either case, it is a matter of observing a set of objects. In all of this genre, therefore, anthropology exudes a self-confidence which parallels and complements that of politics. It is the confidence of the colonizer in his dual role of conquistador and scholar.

Colonialist historiography outgrew such mercantilist concern by the end of the eighteenth century and acquired, within the next two decades, a new look conforming to the requirements of British capital in the age of industrialism and those of metropolitan politics in the 'Age of Improvement'. This orientation was pioneered, appropriately enough, by the Utilitarian philosopher, James Mill, whose *History of British India*, published in 1818, earned for him celebrity as 'the first historian of India'.<sup>124</sup> As a measure of contemporary appreciation that sobriquet meant a radical devaluation of the genre produced by the Company's servants before his time. What is more significant is that it indexed a nineteenth-century European prejudice according to which pre-colonial India was said to have no history, and therefore, 'the first historian of India' had to be English.

That prejudice occurs in its most systematic and sophisticated form in the philosophy of Mill's German contemporary, Hegel. History, 'real history' as the latter put it, presupposed the existence of the state.<sup>125</sup> For, 'a commonwealth in the process of coalescing

<sup>124</sup> Alexander Bain, *James Mill: A Biography* (New York, 1967), p. 178.

<sup>125</sup> Hegel, *Lectures*, p. 134.

and raising itself up to the position of a state requires formal commandments and laws', and 'thereby creates a record of its own development . . . on which Mnemosyne, for the benefit of the perennial aim which underlies the present form and constitution of the state, is impelled to confer a lasting memory'. But in India society was 'petrified into natural determinations—i.e. the caste system'. As 'an order based firmly and permanently on nature', it lacked an 'ultimate end in the shape of progress and development'. An organism endowed with 'no intelligent recollection, no object worthy of Mnemosyne', it drifted without 'a fixed purpose . . . worthy of history'.<sup>126</sup>

No state, no history. The congruence between these two negatives mediated, for Hegel, the contradiction between nature and culture, between Chronos and Zeus:

A nation is only world-historical in so far as its fundamental element and basic aim have embodied a universal principle; only then is its spirit capable of producing an ethical and political organisation . . . In this way, the Greeks speak of the rule of Chronos or Time, who devours his own children (i.e. the deeds he has himself produced) . . . Only Zeus, the political god . . . was able to check the power of time; he did so by creating a conscious ethical institution, i.e. by producing the state.<sup>127</sup>

Zeus stood, of course, for the bourgeoisie itself, and Hegel's theory of the state celebrated its historic conceit in an appropriately mythic form at a time when it was still playing 'political god' to Europe, demolishing the remnants of an old absolutist order and replacing it by new republics. But the development of that class was far from uniform, and consequently, republicanism was for the project of the younger continental bourgeoisie what the civilizing mission was for the colonial project of its older and expansionist opposite number in England. The 'fundamental element and basic aim' of both the projects 'embodied a universal principle which, taken out of its metaphysical wrapping, could clearly be recognized as none other than the universalizing tendency of capital we have met before.

Hegel's political enthusiasm thus found its foil in the arrogance with which Mill denounced a substantial part of India's pre-colonial past as barbaric in his *History*. However, even as he argued that India had no history due to stagnation in its social development,

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., pp. 136–7.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

Hegel could still write admiringly about 'this country, so rich in spiritual achievements of a truly profound quality'.<sup>128</sup> But to James Mill it was all a matter of arrested mental development. 'It is allowed on all hands that no historical composition existed in the literature of the Hindus', he observed; 'they had not reached that point of intellectual maturity, at which a value of the record of the past for the guidance of the future begins to be understood'.<sup>129</sup>

Mill's anti-Indian prejudices in the *History of British India* have been noticed and criticized. But all that has been written to refute his errors of fact and failures of judgement leaves one vital question still without answer: what is there in the logic of that work which requires the insertion of the denunciatory chapters on Hinduism? There is hardly anything in the narrative that calls for this digression. The work starts with an account of the initial efforts made by the English to sail to the East in order to acquire a commercial base for themselves in that region. However, instead of continuing until the battle of Plassey, the author stops abruptly at 1711 with the foundation of the East India Company, and devotes all of Books II and III to a retrospective survey of ancient and medieval India.

His own justification of this procedure, as given at the end of Book I, derived apparently from the need he thought the readers had for some background information before proceeding to the principal theme of the work, that is, the establishment of British rule in the subcontinent.<sup>130</sup> To that end, he had already, in the preamble to the work, announced his intention 'to exhibit as accurate a view as possible of the character, the history, the manners, religion, arts, literature, and laws of the extraordinary people with whom this intercourse had thus begun; as well as of the physical circumstances, the climate, the soil, and productions, of the country in which they were placed'.<sup>131</sup> Yet, as his biographer, Alexander Bain, has pointed out, 'This last part . . . has no chapter expressly allotted to it, and is hardly perceptible anywhere'.<sup>132</sup> Instead, what we are offered is a dissertation on ancient Hindu culture taking up all of Book II, followed by a historical account beginning with the Ghaznavids and ending with the Mughals in

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>129</sup> James Mill, *The History of British India*, vol. II (4th Edition; London, 1840), p. 67.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., vol. I, pp. 152–3.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 2

<sup>132</sup> Bain, p. 176.

Book III. There is nothing in the subsequent parts of the work which cannot be understood without the help of this introjection. On the contrary, these two Books may be said to be positively unhelpful in one important respect: however interesting in themselves, they break up the narrative and thus undermine the reader's concentration on the developing theme of Britain's relations with India since the sixteenth century, with which the *History* begins.

What purpose, then, is served by this massive digression? It serves the avowedly didactic purpose announced by Mill at the outset. '*The subject forms an entire, and highly interesting, portion of the British History*', he writes;

and it is hardly possible that the matter should have been brought together, for the first time, without being *instructive*. . . . If the success corresponded with the wishes of the author, he would throw light upon a state of society, curious, and commonly misunderstood; *upon the history of society, which in the compass of his work presents itself in almost all its stages and all its shapes; upon the principles of legislation, in which he has so many important experiments to describe; and upon the interests of his country, of which, to a great degree, his countrymen have remained in ignorance*. . . .<sup>133</sup>

Nothing like this could have been written by a mercantilist historian. The perspective had shifted: it was no longer that of a conquistador, but of a legislator. The author had set out to give India a government administered according to the principles of utility. He spoke therefore in the idiom of Improvement rather than of Order. And he was very much the child of his age to seek a site for his reforms in the Orient, and stood, in this regard, in a direct line of succession to Pattullo, who, in the 1770s, had dreamt up a Physiocratic utopia in his plan for the *amélioration* of the newly conquered territories of Bengal. The change in the source of inspiration from the French *philosophes* to a very English 'philosophical radicalism' had apparently done nothing to change the visionary's need for a *tabula rasa* on which to inscribe his 'principles of legislation'. Yet, in the second decade of the nineteenth century, he could no longer hope to proceed, like his precursor of fifty years ago, on the innocent assumption that Indian reform was simply a matter of filling an Eastern void by 'important experiments' of Western invention. It was imperative, therefore, for

<sup>133</sup> Mill, *History*, vol. 1, pp. 2-3. Emphasis added.

Utilitarian discourse to create a void, since none was given. Accordingly, the author's textual strategy required that the ancient indigenous culture of the colonized should be demolished on intellectual and moral grounds, so that he could then go on to posit his own system into that vacancy.

This demolition is an act of spiritual violence. It amounts to robbing the subject people of their past which is one of the principal means of their self-identification. It also prepares the ground for a substitution: the *bad* Hindu history could now be replaced by a *good* history in the making under colonial auspices. To this end, the record of the intervening period of about five hundred years is mobilized in such a way as to make of the Islamic component of Indian culture an accomplice of colonialism. All of Book III of Mill's *History* is devoted to this tactic. It serves, in the first place, to demonstrate the absolute inferiority of Hindus to Muslims in all respects. (This is the function of Chapter 5 of Book III of the *History*). The contrast is obviously intended to justify the reduction of Hindu culture to nullity, as already done in the previous parts of the work. But it is also meant to support the author's design to 'throw light . . . upon the history of society . . . in almost all its stages . . .'.

The Muslims who came to India initially as invaders from Western Asia, he writes, 'had in fact attained a stage of civilization higher than that of the Hindus'.<sup>134</sup> One had, therefore, to ask 'Whether by a government, moulded and conducted agreeably to the properties of Persian civilization, instead of a government moulded and conducted agreeably to the properties of Hindu civilization, the Hindu population of India lost or gained'.<sup>135</sup> The answer was, of course, 'that human nature in India gained, and gained very considerably, by passing from a Hindu to a Mohammedan government'.<sup>136</sup> It followed, therefore, that human nature would gain still further if the country were to be ruled by conquerors even more civilized than the Muslims. The British were such conquerors. For, the Muslim, however superior to the Hindu, was still far below the British in the scale of civilization. 'He [the Mohammedan] more nearly resembles our own half-civilized ancestors', wrote Mill in an outburst of praise.<sup>137</sup> For a measure of

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., vol. II, p. 479. <sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 484.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 517.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 485.

his faith in the benefits of British rule for India, one has, therefore, simply to read 'Europe' for 'West Asia', 'Christian' for 'Mohammedan', 'British civilization' for 'Persian civilization', and 'the raj' for 'Mohammedan government' in the observations discussed above.

Thus the substitution of Indian culture by colonialism was completed in two successive movements—the abolition of the historic culture of the Hindus followed by the supersession of that of the Muslims. Taken together, these two movements amounted to a deletion of the entire pre-colonial past of our people who were compensated for that loss by the gift of a new history—a foreshortened history with the colonial state as its subject. Henceforth, the history of the subcontinent, like its map, would be painted red, with all of its past since the battle of Plassey assigned to the rubric, 'History of British India'. Henceforth, too, British annexation of South Asian territory would have its spiritual complement in a British appropriation of the past of the subject population, allowing all of colonialist historiography to be guided by Mill's assertion: '*The subject forms an entire, and highly interesting, portion of the British History*'.<sup>138</sup> But as he had himself insisted throughout his work, India was utterly different from Britain in every respect; in religion, manners, civilization, language—indeed, in every qualitative detail. How, then, could one of two such dissimilar entities be said to form a portion of the other? Only in terms of the lineage of power, that is, in terms of the status, function and activity of the colonial state as an offspring of the metropolitan state and a vehicle of the latter's will. Hereafter, the discourse of history would be obsessively concerned with 'the character and tendency of that species of relation to one another in which the mother country and her eastern dependencies [were] placed',<sup>139</sup> and consequently, it would represent the life of the colonized as no more than a moment in the career of the metropolitan state.

Note, however, that this state was supposed to rule not (as the mercantilists would have it) by the sword, but by civilization—not by force but by consent. But since the regime, as an autocracy, had little use for consent, both of the measures of persuasion legislated by Mill, namely, culture and government, were conspicuous by their failure to strike roots to any significant depth among the disinherited and disfranchised population. Liberal culture hardly

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 2. Emphasis added.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

managed to penetrate beyond the upper crust of Indian society, while the ideal of liberal government persisted only as an idle and empty cant until the end of the raj. This contradiction between Utilitarian principle and 'Anglo-Indian' performance, so symptomatic of the metropolitan bourgeoisie's failure to inform dominance by hegemony in its Indian empire, rankles in colonialist historiography as an ineradicable sign of bad faith: ever since the publication of the *History of British India*, James Mill & Sons have been pretending to write the history of India while writing, in fact, the history of Britain in its South Asian career.

### *Bad Faith of Historiography*

There are two idioms in which this bad faith is typically expressed. Both derive from the political philosophy of Improvement. One of these is cultural, and its function is to document and display the record of colonial rule as a civilizing force. The raj, it argues, introjected liberal Western values and helped thereby to promote social reform, combat superstition and generally raise the level of the indigenous culture. This claim, which was once the staple of school texts throughout the subcontinent, understates the failure of liberalism to overcome the resistance of entrenched feudal customs and belief systems, and the compromises imposed by the latter on official and non-official elitist attempts at social reform. Above all, it amounts to a rather partial view of history insofar as it ignores the radical urge for reform in a large area of Indian society, where numerous autonomous movements of the subaltern, unaffected by Western values, were pitted against caste, class, ethnic and (to a lesser extent) sexual dominance.

In any case, the theme of civilizing mission began to lose its credibility as colonialism had its record assessed by an increasingly critical subject population. To the latter, the benefits of officially sponsored social reform seemed to have been cancelled out by the aggravation of what was believed to be officially engineered caste and communal conflict designed to keep the natives divided in order to perpetuate foreign rule. This scepticism, combined with a nationalist pride that refused to take Western superiority in culture for granted, forced historiography to shift its emphasis from reform to education as the main component of Britain's spiritual gift to India.

Education had always ranked high on the agenda of colonialism.

In the eighteenth century, Philip Francis had thought of it as a programme of instruction in English to induce Indians 'to qualify themselves for employment',<sup>140</sup> that is, to act as cogs in the wheel of the colonial administration. Macaulay, in the next century, prescribed it as a nutritive for native minds that had subsisted far too long on a poor diet of indigenous superstitions. But as opposition to the raj grew more and more widespread during its last fifty years and politics came to be of cardinal importance in modern Indian culture, the emphasis on bureaucratic and intellectual uses of education was replaced, in colonialist historiography, by its valorization as an instrument of political training. Thus, Dodwell, writing in 1936, could describe Western education as what had inducted the Indian to 'new political conceptions', to political institutions 'such as he had never known save in embryonic forms long forgotten', to 'a conception of law totally unfamiliar', to 'the rule of law . . . a stern reality instead of an ideal, [under which] every subject was entitled (according to many political authors) to political rights'. And, above all, nationalism 'was born and nurtured', according to him, 'under the stimulus of western education'.<sup>141</sup>

Years later, in the post-colonial era, education and politics were to be connected in much the same manner by colonialist historiography speaking in the voice of a Cambridge scholar, Anil Seal. The 'general problem' addressed in his monograph on the emergence of Indian nationalism was, he said, 'how modern politics in India began', and he then went on to state his thesis: 'Education was one of the chief *determinants* of these politics, and their *genesis* is clearly linked with those Indians who had been schooled by western methods'.<sup>142</sup> Mill's idea of reducing Indian history to a 'portion of the British History' was realized thus in the reduction of Indian politics to Western education.

The absurdity of such reduction is obvious. If it were true, there would be nothing left to Indian politics except the sum of the political activities of 'graduates and professional men in the

<sup>140</sup> R. Guha, p. 155.

<sup>141</sup> H. H. Dodwell, *India* (Bristol, 1936), pp. 188–9, and ch. vii *passim*.

<sup>142</sup> Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1968), p. 16.  
Emphasis added.

presidencies'. Even Seal, who had once presented that thesis with much verve, came to see its deficiencies, recanted, and replaced it by another, but alas equally elitist, interpretation. The 'genesis' and 'determinants' of politics were no longer sought in education; in the new version, these were situated in *government*—the second idiom, also derived from Mill, in which the bad faith of colonialist historiography was henceforth to express itself. 'It is our hypothesis', wrote Seal, 'that the *structure of imperial government* can provide a clue to the way *Indian politics* developed'.<sup>143</sup>

What is meant by 'the structure of imperial government' here is the complex of organizations, activities and discourses made up of the chain of command from Whitehall to the lowest reaches of British power in the subcontinent, the bureaucracy with all its rules, orders and schedules, all levels of officially sponsored institutions from the central to the local, as well as the laws and executive decisions made by them and the practical measures used to implement these. Taken together, they stand for the ensemble called colonial administration. The mode of historiography which is primarily concerned to deal with it is administrative history. One of its exemplars, a collection of essays on South India, has been described by David Washbrook (who has worked out the implications of this 'hypothesis' more fully than any other scholar) as 'an attempt to outline the principal administrative institutions of southern India and to show how they influenced the development of political organisations'.<sup>144</sup> This, with the name of the region taken out, would apply to the genre as a whole. But what is truly astonishing about this exercise is its author's claim to novelty. According to him, 'a gap has emerged between administrative and political historians'—a gap which, presumably, it has been to the credit of Cambridge historiography to locate and bridge. And to leave the reader in no doubt about the measure of this achievement, it is said that 'in its *early stages of development*, modern political history has not needed to consider administration'.<sup>145</sup> In other words, thanks to the intervention of this

<sup>143</sup> Anil Seal, 'Imperialism and Nationalism in India' in J. Gallagher, G. Johnson and A. Seal, *Locality, Province and Nation* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 6 and n.4. Emphasis added.

<sup>144</sup> D. Washbrook, 'Introduction' in C. J. Baker and D. A. Washbrook, *South India: Political Institutions and Political Change, 1880–1940* (Delhi, 1975), p. 1.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. For a number of claims made for the superiority of Cambridge historiography, see Washbrook, 'Introduction', pp. 1–19 *passim* as well as D. A.

particular group of scholars, historiography has at last come of age!

The truth, contrary to such claim, is that administrative history had developed as a genre of historiography almost from the beginning of colonial rule and it has never been anything but an integral part of political history. It was in the very nature of the colonial state that the theme of administration should figure prominently in its earliest accounts. As an autocracy, which had originated in conquest and ruled over an alien population almost entirely by the sword for the first fifty years, the early colonial state had no means other than its administrative apparatus by which to record, measure and assess its own articulation. Imposed externally on the subcontinental population, that is, not having arisen out of a churning of the indigenous society itself, it was completely divorced from the political life of its subjects. Those linkages with the native elite, which the Cambridge scholars have been so concerned to describe, were yet to be formed. In that phase of self-absorption, colonialism was trapped in a reflexivity thanks to which all its political stimulus was addressed singularly to its own administration (understood, in this context, as the sum of all transactions between the developing organs of the state) and matched by a direct and unmediated response from the latter. Consequently, at this initial stage, there was no political history that did not read like administrative history, and vice versa.

This is a condition of historiography with which all students of early British rule in India are thoroughly familiar. One has simply to turn to William Bolts' *Considerations on Indian Affairs* (London, 1772) or Harry Verelst's *View of the Rise, Progress and Present State of the English Government in Bengal* (London, 1772) to realize how impossible it was to talk about the politics of colonialism without being directly involved in an argument about the administration of the Company's territories. Or, take the very different case of James Grant's *An Inquiry into the Nature of Zemindary Tenures in the Landed Property of Bengal* (London, 1790). Written as a contribution to an ongoing debate about the administration of land revenue, it develops into a treatise on the relation between the state and landed magnates in pre-colonial times and its implications for the East India Company as a successor regime.

Politics and administration were easily conflated in the historical works of these first colonizers, because the two had not yet come to be differentiated within what was still, by and large, a predatory, tribute-gathering, mercantilist project of primitive accumulation. Even later, as colonialist dominance matured into a vehicle of metropolitan industrial and financial interests, its organic composition, in spite of some variations in the magnitudes of its constituent elements C and P, was not altered radically enough to rend politics and administration apart. In other words, the colonial state being what it was, that is, a dominance without hegemony had to have its administration firmly stapled to politics, and consequently, it was not necessary for historiography to develop any modal distinction between the two in its own discourse. A general recognition of this overlap is amply documented in historical writings of our own time at all levels—from the profound, as in W. K. Firminger's penetrating analysis of the relation between sovereignty and Diwani in his magisterial *Introduction to the Fifth Report* (Calcutta, 1917), to the banal, as in the school manuals of the inter-war period where political history was almost invariably written up as the administrative record of viceroys and lieutenant-governors.

Thus, the notion of a gap between administrative and political history has little to support it either in the facts of historiography or in any intelligent political theory of colonialism. The novelty of the Cambridge approach does not, therefore, lie in marrying administrative and political history, for these two modes were indissolubly bound in a sort of *sanatan* Hindu wedlock by the very system to which they referred. It lies in the attempt of the Cambridge scholars to clean up the musty mansion of elitist historiography, reject some of its worn out fittings and furnishings, and put a new gloss over it. The job, I say in genuine admiration, has been brilliantly done. It owes its shine and finish not only to the sophistication of craft, but to the chemistry of the paint. It is the old colonialist argument rejuvenated by a new formula of power.

Politics, in this new Cambridge approach, is not different from the previous, though now disowned thesis of the same school in one fundamental sense: it is still a matter of imperialist stimulus and native response. However, the stimulus, in this version, does not come in the form of culture or education, but of government. How does governmental stimulus work? In two ways. In the first place, it trains the subjects in the use of the institutions of colonial govern-

ment, rewarding the learners by material and spiritual resources (ranging from jobs and canal water to knighthoods and liberal values), and generating among them both a competition for the available prizes and a shared sense of collaboration with the raj. Secondly, the stimulus works by encouraging the natives to replicate the institutions of government by setting up institutions of their own (called 'associations' by Seal) and develop, in that process, a matching non-official arena where all, in its turn, will be modelled on the institutional procedure, reward system and patron-client nexus of the primary, official arena. The sum of the relations, activities and discourses generated by governmental stimulus in these two ways is what constitutes politics according to the current version of Cambridge historiography.

I appreciate this model for its coherence and its lucidity. It is a vast improvement on both the previous (sabre-rattling and civilizing-mission) models of colonialist historiography, which have been, in one form or another, the dominant influence on teaching and research so far. In spite of the hectoring pedantry and the factious pettiness of some of its practitioners, this historiography, at its best, has much to teach us about colonialism both as a political system and as a persistent intellectual influence in the post-colonial era. But with all my admiration for it as a negative example, I reject this historiography as a symptom of blatant bad faith. It is not what it pretends to be. It is not concerned with the history of India at all. Its aim is to write up Indian history, after Mill, as a 'portion of the British History'. As such, it constitutes a misappropriation, a violence.

The subject of this neo-colonialist historiography is the Empire. Its instrument, the imperial government, alone is endowed with the initiative that defines the structure and movement of politics. The colonized, in this thesis, have no will of their own. They simply slot into a framework made by the rulers for them. The metaphor is Seal's: 'The British built the framework; the Indians fitted into it'.<sup>146</sup> In agreement with this view, Indian response to imperial initiative is regarded as entirely imitative. As Gallagher put it, 'Government impulse had linked much more closely the local and provincial arenas of politics; and the general trend among Indian

<sup>146</sup> Seal, 'Imperialism and Nationalism in India', p. 8.

politicians, constitutionalist or not, was to react to this initiative by copying it'.<sup>147</sup> The force of this argument is to reduce Indian nationalism to a mere echo of imperialism, according to Seal, or as Gallagher suggested, to its offspring.<sup>148</sup>

The only role that can be assigned to Indians in this utterly replicative, imitative politics is that of the collaborator. The words, 'collaborator' and 'collaboration' occur frequently in these writings.<sup>149</sup> Indeed, this interpretation of Indian history rests *entirely* on a theory of collaboration. Colonialism is described as 'British rule through Indian collaboration'; administration at the local level is said to have been guided by 'easy-going collaboration' at a particular stage in the career of the raj; at another stage, we are told of a 'new system' of representation 'casting wider nets to find collaborators'; and so on.<sup>150</sup>

Now, it may not sound particularly revealing to most people that British rule in India had to rely on Indian collaboration. Any regime that is not exclusively based on force must rely to a certain extent on the collaboration of those over whom it rules. The adequacy of a theory of collaboration must therefore be judged by its ability to specify the extent to which collaboration succeeds in mediating the contradiction between the rulers and the ruled. The strategy of the Cambridge approach is to credit that mediation with complete success in this regard and represent the colonized subject's relation to the colonizer as one in which C\* triumphed effectively over R. In other words, *it is a strategy aimed at characterizing colonialism as a hegemonic dominance.*

Two devices have been adopted to this end. The first is to endow collaboration with a set of liberal-bourgeois attributes by making it a matter of *competition* and *representation*. Competition is a key concept in this view of Indian history. It is what transforms the relation between rulers and the ruled into a patron-client relationship.

<sup>147</sup> John Gallagher, 'Congress in Decline: Bengal, 1930–39', in Gallagher, Johnson and Seal, p. 270.

<sup>148</sup> 'Imperialism built a system which interlocked its rule in locality, province and nation; nationalism emerged as a matching structure of politics'. (A. Seal, 'Imperialism and Nationalism in India', p. 27). 'Imperialism devours its own children. Nationalism destroys its own parents'. (J. Gallagher, 'Congress in Decline: Bengal, 1930–39', p. 325).

<sup>149</sup> At least six times in Seal, 'Imperialism and Nationalism in India'.

<sup>150</sup> Seal, 'Imperialism and Nationalism in India', pp. 12, 13, 15.

It is also what constitutes the dynamics of politics, for it is by competing for rewards made available by the raj that the natives learn how to use the institutions of government, politicize themselves and involve others in such a way as to direct the thrust of the political process from the upper to the lower levels, from provinces to localities. In other words, competition is assigned the role of generalizing the distribution of power. The point is driven home again and again by metaphors of the market place: the object of competition is 'opportunity' and 'resources'; competitors 'haggle' and 'bargain'; politics is 'transactional politics'; transactions are mediated by 'contractors' and 'subcontractors'; and so on. The vocabulary of political economy is smuggled into a description of politics in such a way as to give the latter a semblance of freedom and openness.

But where, in the politics of the raj, was that freedom, that openness? Resources and opportunities were addressed *selectively* to a small, very small minority of the population—the elite, and this was done with deliberation, as a matter of policy. Consequently, most of the land was appropriated by landlords and the upper strata of landowning classes; irrigation benefited primarily the rural rich; education was monopolized by upper castes and upper classes; and jobs circulated among those who had been already nominated for them by their access to education. Seen in this light, the so-called 'opportunities' and 'resources' look more like privileges and perquisites, and 'competition' more like feudal jousting than free bargaining in an open market.

This is not to deny the movement generated by colonialism in Indian politics, but to assess this movement for what it really was—that is, as a force which, even as it disturbed the traditional power relations to some extent, was still wanting both in the strength and the will to destroy them and ended up by redistributing their moments within the existing parameters. It is difficult, therefore, to justify conceptualizing the politics of collaboration in terms of the transactional ideals of political economy. Yet it is hardly possible to overestimate the importance of this approach as an ideological intervention aimed at construing colonialism into a hegemonic dominance. For the Cambridge effort at squaring this particular circle is symptomatic of the failure of liberalism, hence of neo-colonialist historiography as one of its instruments, to come to terms with the fact that the universalist urge of metropolitan capital meets in colonialism a limit it can never overcome.

The notion of representation, too, is designed to endow the raj with a spurious hegemony. The function of representation, like that of competition, was to promote collaboration. 'It brought more Indians into consultation about the management of their affairs; yet it kept them at work inside a framework which safeguarded British interests', writes Seal. A rather narrow system designed for 'the recruitment of Indian assistants at the levels where they were needed' and for setting them 'to work particularly at the points of execution rather than of command', the organs of local government are rightly described as 'modest representative bodies'. Yet, the claims made for these 'modest representative bodies' are far from modest. It is these, we are told, which 'enabled government to associate interests in the localities more widely', making representation 'one of the vehicles for driving deeper into local society'. Integrated into a system of indirect representation, they also helped the British to add 'first a representative, and later an elective, veneer to the superior councils', so that 'the spread of representation . . . produced a legislative system which extended from the lowest to the highest level in India'. Thus, the modest local institutions were said to have constituted a key link in 'a chain of command stretching from London to the districts and townships of India . . . so that even the pettiest official intervention in a locality issued from a general authority'.<sup>151</sup> In other words, representation, according to this theory, succeeded in mobilizing Indian co-operation and consent on a scale so wide as to put the regime in a non-antagonistic relation with its subjects and thereby make for a hegemonic and unifying dominance.

An achievement of that order would require a very wide representation, one of so vast a magnitude that the collaboration generated by it would be massive enough to cope with the tasks of persuasion and linkage entrusted to it. Yet, as we know, representation, in colonial India, was a pretty restricted affair. It consisted either of nomination alone, or subsequently of the latter combined with election based on a very limited franchise. In a land of paupers, only a handful of property owners were allowed the right to vote; in a land of illiteracy, only a handful of those lucky enough to have access to higher education. Representation never approximated even remotely to democracy, and there is nothing to suggest otherwise in the Cambridge thesis. On what grounds, then, can it credit the raj with

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., pp. 6, 12, 13, 14.

such a broad-based collaboration and so deep a local penetration—in short, with hegemony? Only by *wishing away the phenomenon of resistance* both as a matter of fact and as a historical necessity.

If collaboration, brought about by competition and representation, may be said to be the first, affirmative device by which colonialism is endowed with hegemony in this historiography, a second, negative device it uses for the same purpose is a conjuring trick to make resistance disappear from the political history of India under British rule. In this respect, not much seems to have changed in the Cambridge approach since its previous stance which, to turn to Seal's 1968 monograph as an exemplar, *put popular resistance firmly outside politics*. The Indigo Rebellion and the Deccan Riots were dismissed by him as 'peasant risings of the traditional type, the reaching for sticks and stones as the only way of protesting against distress. Of specific political content they show little sign'. There are some other instances as well which are scoffed at as 'scuffling produced by . . . religious and agrarian agitations' and do not qualify as political either because they originated in 'simple societies' with 'an inborn propensity to revolt', or because they were 'grounded on local grievances and local aspirations, and . . . dependent on local leadership' (at that time, five years before the updated thesis, the local was still sub-political!), or because they were, even as all-India movements, 'an old-fashioned sort . . . seeking to march backwards with fire and sword to the good old days of Aurangzeb'.<sup>152</sup>

Such exclusion would have been quite in order, if the explanatory power claimed for this historiography were less comprehensive. One doesn't have to explore the peculiarities of such 'scuffling' if the politics of union board and chaukidari tax is all that one wants to write about. But the Cambridge scholars are nothing if not ambitious. They have set out to provide an interpretation that would explain all of politics for us, they have a general theory. As Seal modestly states his aim: 'In order to provide a more general explanation, we propose an alternative approach'.<sup>153</sup>

<sup>152</sup> Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, pp. 12–14.

<sup>153</sup> Seal, 'Imperialism and Nationalism in India', p. 5. Also see *ibid.*, p. 27 where he speaks of arguments of a different kind as 'probably significant, possibly crucial, but certainly not general'. Emphasis added.

But what kind of 'general explanation' of the history of India under British rule are we offered, when there is no room in that history for the phenomenon of resistance which occurs throughout the period in every region of the subcontinent and does so in many different forms ranging from the most peaceful to the most violent, involving participation in masses ranging from a few individuals to tens of thousands at a time? What kind of 'general explanation' of politics is this alternative approach which does not know how to proceed except by denying this massive, recurrent and widespread phenomenon of resistance any 'specific political content', when *in every instance* that resistance is *nothing but political*? To be asked to place our trust in so *partial* a view of history and politics as a 'general explanation' seems to me to be a kind of academic confidence trick.

Like all confidence tricks, it works by dressing up what it is required to prove as a premiss for the unwary reader to accept without questioning. The premiss, as noticed above, is a notion of politics defined as Indian collaboration with the raj mediated by the institutions of government. Once that premiss is agreed upon and nothing is left to politics but collaboration, resistance stands expunged as an irrelevance and an aberration without requiring further argument. But resistance is a stubborn thing and would not be so easily left out of history. To guard against its intrusion, it is necessary, therefore, to ensure that its symptoms—solidarity and ideology—however explicit and widespread in history, are not allowed to spoil the tidiness of historiography.

Two vanishing tricks are addressed to these symptoms in all recent writings of the genre under discussion. By the first of these, horizontal solidarity is spirited away from the political processes of the colonial era. Thus,

What seems to have decided political choices in the localities was the *race for influence, status and resources*. In the pursuit of these aims, *patrons* regimented their *clients* into *factions* which jockeyed for position. Rather than partnerships between fellows, these were usually associations of *bigwigs and followers*. In other words they were *vertical alliances, not horizontal alliances*.<sup>154</sup>

This is fully consistent with the Cambridge view of politics as a rat-race between collaborators handpicked by the raj from the elite

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 3. Emphasis added.

strata of the indigenous population. All is therefore a matter of ‘big-wigs’ mobilizing their ‘followers’ into ‘factions’ in the scramble for ‘influence, status and resources’ put out by the regime as the prize for collaboration. Hence, there is no solidarity between fellows; there are only vertical alliances. However, if at this point you start wondering about such things as class struggle, caste conflict, communal strife, adivasi campaigns, etc., described by some benighted leftists as instances of horizontal alliance, Seal, whom we have cited above, is there to rescue you from misconceptions of that order. ‘Local struggles were seldom marked’, he says, ‘by the alliance of landlord with landlord, peasant with peasant, educated with educated, Muslim with Muslim and Brahmin with Brahmin’.<sup>155</sup>

There you are! You must be utterly naïve if you thought that there was an alliance of landlords against tenants in Pabna in 1873 or millowners against workers in Ahmedabad in 1918. You delude yourself in discerning any ‘partnership between fellows’ of the same caste in the anti-bhadralok campaign among the Namasudras of Barisal during the Swadeshi Movement, of the same tribe in the Munda uprising led by Birsa, of the same class in the general strike of jute-mill workers in 1929 or sharecroppers in the Tebhaga campaigns of the 1940s, of the same religious community on each of the warring sides involved in the Partition Riots of 1947, of the same nation in the great anti-imperialist struggles of 1919–22, 1930–2, 1942–6. Insofar as these are instances of political mobilization, they are vertical by definition; and insofar as these are instances of horizontal mobilization, they are pre-political by definition. One is simply not allowed to mix politics and solidarity, for that would put resistance on a par with collaboration in any ‘general explanation’ of Indian history under colonial rule and thus bring down the entire edifice of neo-colonialist historiography!

The denial of horizontal alliance complements the other conjuring device by which ideology is made to dissolve as an element of politics. This, too, is designed to keep resistance out of history. For, if there was nothing to politics other than collaboration offered to secure rewards from the raj, it follows that people were urged by interests rather than ideas to respond to the ‘governmental impulse’ on institutional lines. This, according to David Washbrook, was the instance of the ‘purely political’, that is, the ‘political’ which was

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

purged of the dross of ‘public ideology’ and ‘avowed ends’ to derive primarily from ‘the mechanisms of power and ... the behavioural conventions which developed around them’.<sup>156</sup> It is not that ideology did not exist, but it existed only as an element of culture and not of politics. ‘It is important to remember that *religious, caste and linguistic groupings are not political groupings unless they can be shown to behave as such. They are categories of cultural but not necessarily political activity*'.<sup>157</sup> This distinction may strike one as rather odd. For it is difficult to think of any historical situation in which politics would not be an element of culture. Moreover, in a pre-capitalist culture, prior to the emergence of any clear distinction between the sacred and the secular in the affairs of the state, politics, one would have thought, was so thoroughly mingled with religion as to permit of no categorical separation between the two.

Yet, I can see some use for this entirely fallacious distinction in the neo-colonialist reading of Indian history. It serves to sever casteism and communalism from the ideological formations of pre-colonial India and display them as products of what the Cambridge scholars believe to have been entirely an innovation of the raj, namely ‘politics’, or what is the same thing according to them—the native collaborators’ pursuit of resources and opportunities within the institutional framework of British rule. This enables Washbrook to speak of the temple politics of South India as ‘closer to company politics than to those of religious movements’<sup>158</sup> and go on to claim that his study of the non-Brahman movement ‘reveals three important points which are *relevant to all the communal movements of the period*'.<sup>159</sup> But it is precisely because there is no acknowledgement of the role of ideology in any of these three points that they lose their relevance for the study of communalism in northern and eastern India during this period. Thus, to say that ‘the language of the movement was closely related to the language of government’ would do little to explain the scale and force of the support evoked by that language unless it were made clear that the idiom of elite communal politics, however related to the official legal-

<sup>156</sup> Washbrook, ‘Introduction’, pp. 1, 2; ‘Political Change in a Stable Society: Tanjore District 1880 to 1920’ in Baker and Washbrook, p. 20.

<sup>157</sup> Washbrook, ‘Political Change in a Stable Society’, p. 28.

<sup>158</sup> Washbrook, ‘Introduction’, p. 8.

<sup>159</sup> Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics*, pp. 286–7. Emphasis added.

constitutional discourse, had to be translated into a code of traditional politics, much of it religious, in order to mobilize the masses in communal political activity. How this works in the Muslim and Hindu communal politics of Bengal and Uttar Pradesh is amply illustrated in some recent studies by Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey.<sup>160</sup>

Again, how relevant would the following judgement be for any understanding of the politics of Hindu-Muslim or inter-caste relations?

... these movements [writes Washbrook], whatever their pretensions, did not need to have, and many did not have, a political existence prior to the creation of the publicist and administrative categories which they filled. It is *idle for the student of politics, although not perhaps of ideas*, to search through the history and meaning of 'non-Brahmanism' to discover when in the past or at what level of abstraction in 'traditional' thought a notion of the non-Brahman similar to that propagated by the leaders of the non-Brahman movement can be found. The movement emerged when the very novel political processes of early twentieth-century Madras gave it life. *What is interesting to political history is not the ideational antecedents of the movement but the contemporary processes.*<sup>161</sup>

I am not in a position to assess the validity of these observations for South India, since I have no specialized knowledge of that area. But I believe that they will be of little or no use to students of caste and communal movements elsewhere in the country. To say, for instance, that the twentieth-century conflict between bhadralok and Namasudra, Mahar and Brahman, Rajput and Chamar, Hindu and Muslim derived its politics, in each case, from the administrative categories of colonialism would certainly be true—indeed, it would ring with the hollow truth of a truism—if politics were defined merely by administrative categories, as in the Cambridge approach. Otherwise, how can one possibly maintain that these ancient antagonisms 'did not need to have, and many did not have, a political existence prior to the creation of the publicist and administrative categories' of the raj? For, insofar as conflicts like those mentioned above existed in pre-colonial India as a matter of undeniable fact and they were conflicts between entities related as dominant and

<sup>160</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal 1920–1947* (Calcutta, 1984), *passim*; Gyan Pandey, 'Rallying round the Cow: Sectarian Strife in the Bhojpuri Region, c. 1888–1917' in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies II* (Delhi, 1983), pp. 60–129.

<sup>161</sup> Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics*, p. 287. Emphasis added.

subordinate, their political character was affirmed, in all instances, as an articulation of D/S. In other words, *there could be no caste or communal conflict under those conditions that was not necessarily political*. The emergence of the colonial state and the substantial effect this had on such conflicts both in assigning new names and categories to them and in generating new strains in some cases, *did not amount to the transformation of an apolitical phenomenon into political, but to a significant shift from one kind of politics to another*. For us, therefore, communalism stands for an important aspect of the historical movement of D/S which cannot be studied in any meaningful way without relating the contemporary processes to what had gone before in ideation and in social practice.

The exclusion of ideas forms a pair, as we have seen, with the exclusion of solidarity from politics. Predictably, therefore, Washbrook sees nothing but 'vertical systems of political connection' in communal movements.<sup>162</sup> In northern and eastern India communalism was a mass phenomenon—truly an idea that had gripped the masses—and no explanation based solely on vertical alliance can illuminate its forms and its passions which were so vigorously displayed outside the narrow precincts of union boards, district boards and legislative assemblies. Such an explanation would, on the one hand, reduce communalism simply to an effect of collaboration between the ruling elite and the indigenous elite and of competition between groups among the latter. On the other hand, it would exclude the masses from politics on the ground that such of their activities in a communal movement as had not been prompted by their social superiors, amounted merely to 'reaching for sticks and stones,' while such of their ideas as had not been put into their heads by the elite, were simply expressions of what Seal has called 'zealotry'. Politics, as designed by neo-colonialist historiography, could thus be kept neatly elitist and collaborationist.

Far from providing a 'general explanation' of politics of the colonial period, this approach seems to us to be a *monistic, reductionist tactic* to impoverish politics by an arbitrary expurgation of its mass content and by narrowing it down merely to an interaction between the colonizers and a very small minority of the Indian population

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

made up of the elite. It is monistic because it is designed to contain all of politics within a single elitist domain; because within that domain all initiative is assimilated to a singular 'governmental impulse'; because the only response to that impulse it recognizes is self-interest chasing officially designed rewards; and because the only activity it allows for is the collaboration of subordinate with superordinate at every level. With the subaltern domain surgically removed from its system, all initiative other than what emanates from the colonizers and their collaborators strictly ruled out, all elements of resistance meticulously expelled from its political processes, *colonialism emerges from this historiography as endowed with a hegemony which was denied to it by history*. The Cambridge approach achieves this feat by an act of bad faith—by writing up Indian history as a 'portion of the British History'.

#### IV. PREAMBLE TO AN AUTOCRITIQUE

To conclude this discussion on a note about its purpose, it should be made clear that nothing of what has been said above is addressed to the practitioners of colonialist historiography in Britain today. We recognize it for a fact that South Asian history of the period between Plassey and Partition continues to be taught, written and otherwise propagated there, for the most part, as a 'portion of the British History' in accordance with the agenda formulated by James Mill. That, so far as we are concerned, is a cultural problem rooted in British society itself. It is up to that society and its intellectuals to deal with it, if they wish to do so.

For that problem is symptomatic of a distemper created by one nation's oppression of another, the consequences of which for the culture of the oppressor nation is primarily, though not exclusively, for the latter to worry about. To those who, in our part of the world, are condemned to live with the legacy of that oppression as its victims, it is evident that Britain's paramountcy over its South Asian empire has induced its political and intellectual culture thoroughly to absorb the knowledges, techniques and attitudes which informed and sustained that paramountcy for two hundred years. The result has been to produce a literature still incarnadine with the glow of imperial 'achievements', a language that permits racist in-

sults to pass in everyday use as harmless jokes, a pervasive and often violent discrimination against Asians who live in the pores of British society. It is a culture which has iron deposited in its soul, and not all the vigour of a minority of truly anti-imperialist tendencies has succeeded in dissolving it.

There is a possibility—the future can always be trusted to work miracles—that some day, generations from now, Everyman in Britain will no longer take pride in the colonial record of his ancestors and even begin to develop a little embarrassment about it. But it is a safe guess that for a long time yet, during intervals between one Falklands War and another, he will go on contentedly feeding on the tales of the raj to sustain his sense of national grandeur. The only critique which can discourage the historian from abetting such spiritual mastication is conspicuous by its absence from the British intellectual scene, even from its radical wing. Is it possible to find as much as a twinge of self-critical recognition in the pages, say, of the *History Workshop*, to suggest the need to challenge the Mill-Dodwell tradition of writing on India and join issue with the recycling of imperialist historiography in terms of teaching and research at all the major centres of South Asian studies in the United Kingdom? But if that is how academics and other intellectuals of that country want their work on colonial India to stay, that is *their* problem.

On our own part, we present our views on the structure of dominance in colonial India and historiography's relation to it as a critique of our *own* approach to the Indian past and our *own* performance in writing about it. The purpose of this essay is, therefore, simply to stimulate a degree of self-criticism within the practice of Indian historiography. What calls for such self-criticism is our complicity with colonialist historiography. There has never been a school or tendency in Indian historiography that did not share the liberal assumptions of British writing on the colonial theme. Since the first quarter of the nineteenth century, every mode of Indian historical discourse has conformed faithfully to the rationalist concepts and the ground rules of narrative and analytic procedure introduced in the subcontinent by official and non-official British statements on the South Asian past. Systematized and propagated by school manuals and other instruments of a western-style education, this knowledge helped to free our sense of the past from Pura-

nic thraldom, but committed it at the same time to that fundamental tenet of liberal thought according to which British rule in India was a truly historical realization of the universalist tendency of capital.

This commitment has frustrated all attempts made so far to develop a view of colonial rule and its ruling culture that could be said to have broken away, in any *fundamental* sense, from the stand-point of colonialist writing on the structure of power relations under the raj. The theories which inform the conceptualization of the colonial state in such writing are the same as those which inform liberal-nationalist historiography as well. Even the militant-nationalist and left-nationalist objections to British presence in the subcontinent imply no departure from such commitment. For, one may conceptualize the South Asian colonial state as a measure of British capital's universalist drive in the era of imperialism and still militate against the British connection. The contradiction between indigenous capital and metropolitan capital does not *need* an alternative theory of state for its representation in historical discourse.

On the contrary, there is good reason for believing that the inability of radical nationalism to act up to its promise as the harbinger of an autonomous historiography has been due to its failure to back its critique of the raj by a theory which makes colonialism and the colonial state understandable as the barrier at which the universalist urge of capital must inexorably stop. Consequently, it has not been possible for any tendency within our own intellectual practice to come up with a principled and comprehensive (as against eclectic and fragmentary) critique of the indigenous bourgeoisie's universalist pretensions which are articulated nowhere more prominently and significantly than in its hegemonic, but spurious, claim to speak for the nation and its use of historiography in support of that claim. In short, the price of blindness about the structure of the colonial regime as a dominance without hegemony has been, for us, a total want of insight into the character of the successor regime too as a dominance without hegemony.

It is out of an awareness of such a lacuna in the study of our colonial past that we have proceeded, in this essay, to examine the nature of dominance and its discourses. This, we hope, may assist in the *self-criticism of our own historiography*—the historiography of a colonized people—by situating it outside the concave universe of liberal ideology and enabling it thereby to confront its own practice

and its own assumptions by asking: What is colonialism as exemplified by British rule in India? What is there in the power relations of that rule which makes the colonial state in our subcontinent so fundamentally different from its architect, the British metropolitan state? Where lies the originality of Indian culture of the colonial era and why does it defy understanding either as a replication of the liberal-bourgeois culture of nineteenth-century Britain or as the mere survival of an antecedent pre-capitalist culture? And how adequate are our representations of that colonial past to any genuine search for an answer to these questions? It is only by negotiating the complexities of such questions that we may be able to move forward towards an autonomous historiography of colonial India—a historiography which will no longer labour under the tutelage of Mill's paradigm.

Why, it may be asked, should this critique of Indian historiography require a critique of colonialist historiography as its preamble? For two reasons, one of which is a function of *affinity* and the other of *opposition*. The affinity is historical as well as conceptual. Taking the early nineteenth-century Bengali writings on British rule as a convenient point of departure for any study of the development of our historiography, one can see how closely it was modelled, in its first specimens, on mercantilist writings by the East India Company's soldiers and administrators, and subsequently, on Mill's *History*. That influence had so thoroughly permeated the indigenous historical imagination by the second half of the century that British and Indian narratives of the history of the raj were soon to acquire a family resemblance in spite of a note of incipient nationalism which occasionally slipped into the latter as, for instance, in the works of Nilmani Basak and Rajanikanta Gupta. But nationalism, even when it became strong and strident as it did by the 1890s, hardly weakened the bond of this initial affinity. On the contrary, the rationalist, evolutionist and progressivist ideas which had helped to assimilate colonialist historiography to the post-Enlightenment view of world and time, were now ushered into Indian historical thinking and implanted there more firmly than ever before by the force of nationalism itself.<sup>163</sup>

<sup>163</sup> My understanding of this aspect of Indian nationalism has been greatly

Yet it was that very conceptual affinity which was to instigate an antagonism between these kindred modes. For these concepts had a decisive impact on nationalist thought in one of its characteristic drives—namely, its insistence on reclaiming the Indian past. Historiography was one of the two principal instruments—the other being literature—which would henceforth be put to increasingly vigorous use for such reclamation. In other words, historiography would, from this time onward, construct the Indian past as a *national* past that had been violated and appropriated by colonialist discourse. The indigenous historian's mission to recover that past was therefore to acquire the urgency and sanctity of a struggle for expropriating the expropriators.

All of Indian historiography in its dominant, that is, liberal-nationalist mode, has been caught up, since its inception, in the contradictory pulls of such affinity and opposition. It is therefore not, possible to understand its character and subject it to a proper criticism without situating it, first, in the relationship that bonds it to colonialism—a dominance without hegemony—and its historiography. A critique of the latter is, therefore, an essential condition and a necessary point of departure for any critique of Indian historiography itself.<sup>164</sup>

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enhanced by Partha Chatterjee's recent monograph, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World—A Derivative Discourse?* (London & Delhi, 1986).

<sup>164</sup> I am grateful for comments made on parts of a first draft of this essay by the other members of the *Subaltern Studies* editorial team. Their concurrence with the views expressed here may not be taken for granted.

# DISCUSSION

## Subaltern as Perspective

VEENA DAS

The five volumes of *Subaltern Studies* represent a formidable achievement in historical scholarship. They are an invitation to think anew the relation between history and anthropology from a point of view that displaces the central position of the European anthropologist or historian as the subject of discourse and Indian society as its object. This does not mean a rejection of Western categories but signals the beginning of a new and autonomous relation to them. As Gayatri Spivak has often pointed out, to deny that we write as people whose consciousness has been formed as colonial subjects is to deny our history. However, the consciousness of ourselves as colonial subjects is itself modified by our own experience and by the relation we establish to our intellectual traditions.

Let me begin with some of the 'taken for granted' concerns in anthropology which should be interrogated through the endeavour of creating subaltern history. Much of the theoretical arsenal of anthropology consists of concepts that can render other societies knowable in terms of 'laws', 'rules' and patterns of authority. This is equally true whether we take cultural phenomena that belong to the public domain, such as village festivals, or to the intensely private domain such as the incest taboo. In each case anthropologists are interested in seeing how order is created out of chaos—how, for instance, does the incest taboo create enduring relations between men—not how it is violated to create structures of power within the family. In other words, the entire field of transgressions, disorder and violence remains outside the anthropologist's privileged domains of enquiry. We create order by eliminating the chaos that the introduction of the subject might create. It is this aspect to which

Lévi-Strauss made a reference (with approval) when he responded to a critique made by Ricoeur charging him with having posited a categorizing system unconnected with a thinking Subject in his own words:

But far from considering this reservation as indicating some deficiency, I see it as the inevitable consequence on the philosophical level of the ethnographic approach I have chosen since my ambition being to discover the conditions in which systems of truth become mutually convertible and therefore simultaneously acceptable to several different subjects, the pattern of those conditions takes on the character of an autonomous object, independent of any subject . . . I believe that mythology more than anything else makes it possible to illustrate such objectified thought and to provide empirical proof of its reality.<sup>1</sup>

It seems to me that this emphasis upon objectified thought that is simultaneously acceptable to several different subjects, hence is not the thought of any particular thinking subject, makes the savage knowable in a way in which his or her subjectivity can be completely denied. These finished products of collective consciousness are always seen to be representationally complete. In showing the rationality of these systems of thought, the processes of their formulation have rarely been considered. The formidable achievements of structuralism notwithstanding, it repeats in a different key the themes of order out of chaos which were typical of the classical functionalist approaches.

If the undue emphasis upon order and constraint makes it difficult to recognize the subject in theories of social structure, do theories of social action fare better? In its classic formulation in Max Weber, the characteristic of social action was that it was meaningful. Sociological explanation, cautioned Weber, must be able to take the subjectivity of the individual actor into account. Yet a close examination of Weber's theory of social action shows that the paradigm of social action is defined by rational action. Affective action, for example, is only considered to the extent that it is capable of deflecting the course of a well-defined rational action. All the examples of affective action that Weber takes pertain to negative emotions such as anger, jealousy and desire for revenge. Despite his stated intention of treating action as subjective action, there is an overdetermination of man as rational being; hence the category of affective action becomes a residual category in which all that cannot

<sup>1</sup> See Claude Lévi-Strauss. *The Raw and the Cooked* (Harper and Row, 1975), p. 11.

be explained by the paradigm of rational action is sought to be fitted. The individual in Weber's theory of social action is the actor in the capitalist system who exercises an alert control over himself. The category of meaning is reduced to the category of motive; the rationally controlled individual who exercises a constant and alert control over himself in the interest of transforming the world becomes the measure. All other forms of being—whether of non-western man or western woman—are understood in terms of a lack, a deflection from the ideal typical action represented by the paradigm of rational action.<sup>2</sup>

In this context the question is not whether we can completely obliterate the objectified character of social institutions, but rather whether it is at all possible to establish a relation of authenticity towards these institutions. After all, even the work of Goffman and Foucault, committed to recovering the knowing subject, has shown how the reified and alienating power of society flows through the tiniest capillary branches of society. How can the representational closure with which thought presents itself be shown to be the product of thinking subjects? In other words, are there reflexive devices which act as 'corrections' or 'interrogations' in relation to a given society?

In this context the contributions to *Subaltern Studies* make an important point in establishing the centrality of the historical moment of rebellion in understanding the subalterns as subjects of their own histories. Although there are some essays of the typological kind, as for instance Chatterjee's attempt to create a typology of power,<sup>3</sup> or some which study thought as an objectified system of representations, these are the exceptions. All the other essays are concerned with the historical moment of defiance. These are precisely those moments in the life of Indian society when the representational order is in conflict with the emergence of a new order. We have, in such a case, what Castoriadis called the magma of significations,<sup>4</sup> for the representational closure which presents itself

<sup>2</sup> Veena Das, 'Force as a residual category in Max Weber', in Surendra Munshi (ed.), *Marx and Weber: Modern Society on the Drawingboard* (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'More on modes of power and the peasantry', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies II. Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *L'institution imaginaire de la société* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1975).

when we encounter thought in objectified forms is now ripped open. Instead we see this order interrogated. What, then, is the nature of this interrogation?

The first question that we may ask is: how is this moment of rebellion constituted? What comes out in stark clarity in all the contributions to these volumes is that the historian is not engaged here in the understanding of the family, the kinship group or the tribe in its everyday life, but rather that the object of study is the 'contract'<sup>5</sup> which such groups have been compelled to establish with forms of domination belonging to the structures of modernity—Western law (Amin and Guha),<sup>6</sup> Western medicine (Arnold),<sup>7</sup> bureaucracy (Hardiman),<sup>8</sup> police (Arnold, Sarkar).<sup>9</sup> In other words when we encounter the traditional groups of this society in the volumes of *Subaltern Studies* we see them engaged in a struggle with courts of law, with bureaucracy or the police—all signs of the new forms of domination that have been established over them. The very choice of this moment for analysis, I contend, poses a serious challenge to some of the dominant conceptions about tribes or castes in anthropological theory.

One of the ways in which anthropological theory looks at the contrast between what are described as primitive/archaic societies on the one hand, and societies with a feudal past on the other, is in terms of the contrast between cold and hot societies, further translated into the distinction between synchrony and diachrony. At the foundation of this opposition is the contrast between nature and history, coming from the dominance of 'Western, Christian, codes of thought' as Baudrillard stated.<sup>10</sup> Societies which are defined as

<sup>5</sup> The word 'contract' is used here in the semiotic sense of the intersubjective space between two characters in a narrative.

<sup>6</sup> Shahid Amin, 'Approver's testimony, judicial discourse: The case of Chauri Chaura' and Ranajit Guha, 'Chandra's death' in Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies V Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> David Arnold, 'Touching the body: Perspectives on the Indian plague', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies V Writings on South Asian History and Society*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987)

<sup>8</sup> David Hardiman, 'From custom to crime: The politics of drinking in colonial South Gujarat' in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> David Arnold, 'Bureaucratic recruitment and subordination in colonial India: The Madras Constabulary, 1859–1947', in Guha, *SS IV*.

<sup>10</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Le miroir de la production* (Paris editions Galilee: 1985).

could have laws which are like the laws of nature; whereas the succession of feudalism to capitalism belongs to the *interior* laws of other kinds of societies, namely European societies. As the distinguished theologian Abraham Heschel pointed out, theologically nature reflects submission to God's will whereas history is the record of man's defiance.

The first emancipatory act that the *Subaltern Studies* project performs in our understanding of tribes, castes or other such groups is to restore to them their historical being. It is no longer possible to think, for instance, of tribes or inhabitants of the hill regions deprived of their rights to forests (Guha) as simply inhabiting a world of nature.<sup>11</sup> This is because it is their very relation to nature that has been destroyed by the enactment of new laws, which favour the commercial use of forests rather than their preservation as the habitat of tribes. The traces of the past that are left for the historian are, in fact, generated by the oppressive 'contract' that the tribe, caste or village is compelled to make with the modern institutions of domination. These are in the form of bureaucratic reports, police accounts or proceedings of law courts. Other kinds of traces are sometimes analysed, for instance in a remarkable paper by Pandey on modes of history-writing that are indigenous to the culture. However, as Pandey himself states, 'The history of colonial India has generally been written on the basis of British official records for the simple reason that non-official sources are neither quite so abundant nor as easily accessible.'<sup>12</sup> Reserving comment on the supposed 'inaccessibility' of non-official records, I would agree with Pandey's sensitive statement that what made an event in colonial history was focused around the question of 'law and order', its consolidation and breakdown. Thus, to construct the moment of defiance is also to construct the form of legal-rational domination. What is important, however, is that the subjects of this power are not treated as passive beings but are rather shown at the moment in which they try to defy this alienating power. Yet the very fact that this moment is encapsulated in the form of a bureaucratic report or the proceedings of a law court (the form in which it becomes available for study) would imp-

<sup>11</sup> Ramachandra Guha, 'Forestry and social protest in British Kumaon, c. 1893–1921', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV* (Delhi: OUP, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, 'Encounters and Calamities: The history of a North Indian Qasba in the Nineteenth Century', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984).

ly that the moment of rebellion is also the moment of failure or defeat. It is possible that in the face of the massive institutional structures of bureaucratic domination, subaltern rebellions can only provide a night-time of love, to use the evocative phrase of the Greek philosopher Castoriadis; it cannot be transformed into a life-time of love. Yet perhaps in capturing this defiance the historian has given us a means of constructing the objects of such power as subjects. In view of the massive evidence of defiance and rebellion meticulously presented in these volumes, the anthropologist can never again be justified in looking at the social forms of tribes or lineage structures leading an 'as if' natural existence. The global encompassment of these institutions must be studied in order to understand them as historical entities. I would like to spell out the implications of this statement as it is embodied in the descriptions in *Subaltern Studies* in greater detail.

Once we acknowledge that traces of rebellion are embodied in the form of a record produced in the context of the exercise of bureaucratic and legal domination, we also have to accept that the speech of the subaltern, when it becomes available for study, has already been appropriated by these superior forms of authority. This aspect of the record has been repeatedly emphasized by Guha. In the case of Chandra's death described by him,<sup>13</sup> we can see that speech is literally wrenched from the person: 'I administered the medicine in the belief that it would terminate her pregnancy and did not realize that it would kill her' says Brinda, the sister of the dead Chandra. But she says this in the context of a trial in which, to use Guha's words, death is made a murder, a caring sister a murdereress, and the participants within a tragedy defendants.

Or to take another case: when Amin analyses the speech of Shikari who appeared as an approver in the Chauri Chaura case, we note that the speech is produced in first person form for, 'the more Shikari-as-approver implicates himself, the better the chance of his being pardoned'.<sup>14</sup> The formulaic question of the judge posed before the approver's testimony is recorded—namely, is the confession voluntarily made—and has to be understood in the context in which penal truth is being produced. Hence, despite the reference to the supposed voluntary nature of the confession, direct speech here is

<sup>13</sup> Ranajit Guha 'Chandra's death', in Guha (1987), SS V.

<sup>14</sup> Shahid Amin, see note 6.

not evidence of the greater nearness of the subject to his speech, but rather of the distance he is compelled to establish from all others who were participants in the same 'transgression' in order to implicate himself in the hope of being pardoned. That this is not a procedure free from risks is shown by the fate of the other approver in this case, Ramrup Barai, who was convicted of murder and hanged, precisely because he had implicated himself in the hope of being pardoned. Amin's stunning achievement in looking at an approver's testimony in the context of the distribution of roles in a court (roles being viewed as in theatre) is that he is able to show how the order of narration—the appearance of direct versus indirect speech as well as the relation between the production of penal truth and the forms of speech—creates a semiotic web within which judicial discourse may be viewed. Particularly important is his view of the final judgement as being the master discourse which is self-contained and internally consistent, but which has to be analysed in the context of the processes for the construction of penal truth. In terms of method, this should open up new possibilities of looking at legal records not only as evidence of disorders within society, but also as evidence of the forms through which legal domination is established on all spheres of life. Further analysis on these promising lines, however, would require a greater attention to the splitting of the various types of speech produced into statements of referential truth in the indicative present, and those which appear in the past tense that have reference to the particular events under examination. For example, in this case the judge made references to what an ordinary crowd would have done and then compared this to the behaviour of the crowd. The former, in that it seems to embody a timeless truth, would show us how nature was constituted in judicial discourse and the relation of this construction to the form of domination established by institutions responsible for disciplining and punishing. It seems to me that apart from the emphasis upon referential statements, the occurrence of imperative statements would mark off a judicial text at the level of legislation as well as judicial practice.

Although the penal institutions figure so prominently in many essays, one wishes that the contributors had given more attention to the manner in which this legality is established as legitimate, in contradistinction to the alternative legalities of the people. This aspect is particularly important for the understanding of medical models of dominance and the legal models through which customary rights

over nature were eroded. Despite the important contributions of Arnold and Guha to this range of issues,<sup>15</sup> we are never really told how the Epidemic Diseases Act, for instance, which established new rights of the state over the bodies of the people, came to be formulated; or the form of the Forest Act through which rights of people over their own forests were eliminated in favour of the interests of the new bourgeoisie. These acts are studied in terms of their consequences but not in terms of the forms through which their authority was established.

### *The construction of the subaltern as person*

In the first section I noted that in theories of social action formulated by Weber and sociologists of his persuasion, we find an over-determination of man as rational actor so that all other forms of action take on a residual character. Some of the essays in the volumes of *Subaltern Studies*, it seems to me, are not quite able to displace this view of man. Hardiman, in his essay on the Bhils,<sup>16</sup> points out the problems in treating peasants as rational agents of neo-classical economics but then goes on to say that social limitations and religious beliefs prevent tribal people from making rational economic calculations. This seems to assert that the normative behaviour is that of the rational agent, from which the tribal person deviates because of his social limitations. Although Hardiman wants to understand the social practice of the Bhils in terms of its own logic and points out how much the drinking behaviour of the tribal person was viewed from the prism of Brahmanical morality, he cannot resist pointing out that drinking was excessive only on ceremonial occasions, or that it provided for nutritional needs. Thus, far from the way of life of the tribe being seen as a critique of the overdetermination of man as rational being, the drinking behaviour is sought to be explained by a hidden rationality.

The emphasis upon rationality is also evident in Tanika Sarkar's essay on the movement of Jitu Santal.<sup>17</sup> This is a meticulous and detailed working out of a movement to establish what Upendra Baxi has called 'alternative legality' among the Santals. Yet the picture of the Santals that is built constructs them primarily in the language

<sup>15</sup> Arnold, see note 6, and Guha, see note 11.

<sup>16</sup> Hardiman, 'The Bhils and Sahukars of Eastern Gujarat', in *SS V* (1987).

<sup>17</sup> Tanika Sarkar, 'Jitu Santal's movement in Malda, 1924–1932: A study in tribal protest', in Guha (1985), *Subaltern Studies IV*.

through which they have been appropriated for bureaucratic reports. For instance, it is stated that the principal distinction between a Santal and a Hindu is in terms of the pleasure orientation of the former; the Hindu deity which figures in their cult, Kali, is unhesitatingly described as 'malignant'; and it is stated that an all-powerful benevolent figure was lacking in Santal culture. The authority for the latter statement is Hunter, who stated that 'Of a supreme and beneficent God, the Santal has no conception . . . Hunted and driven from country to country by a superior race, he cannot understand how a Being can be more powerful than himself without wishing to harm him.'<sup>18</sup> The entire language here presupposes the civilized-savage dichotomy on which the civilizing mission of the colonial state as well as the missionaries was based. It is also a mute question as to whether this statement is about the Santal or about Hunter.

. A careful deconstruction of how the Santal was constituted in this discourse would have been more appropriate than the straightforward acceptance of these categories. The problem with using such adjectival renderings as the 'pleasure loving Santal' or the 'malignant goddess Kali'—which are taken to be authoritative on the characteristic of the Santal or of Kali—is precisely that, coined in colonial discourse, such words objectify a social ethic and retain their earlier function of describing other cultures in alienating if not degrading forms. In each case we would have to restore the experiential content of what is sociologically objectified.

Jitu Santal wanted to establish an alternative legality through his movement, as Tanika Sarkar's descriptions clearly show. He repeatedly stated that the *bichar*, the judgments of the British courts, were bad and unjust. He wished to substitute for it the processes of adjudication that were indigenous to the Santals. But we are not given a description of the kind of authority that Jitu Santal was propagating as more just and representative of the Santals than that of the alien British authority. The alternative form is too easily assimilated in Tanika Sarkar's description into categories of bureaucratic authority, such as 'law maker' and 'law giver'. Further, many aspects of his movement are discussed much more with reference to the concept of sanskritization than in terms of its aims of establishing alternative legalities. In the process, the author criticizes

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Tanika Sarkar, *ibid.*

the concept of sanskritization and states that the Sanyasi Dol formed by Jitu Santal took a renunciatory stance towards Hinduism. Yet the renunciatory stance is not seen as capable of providing a simultaneous critique of caste society and of the alien British rule. The critique gets firmly placed in the framework of caste and sanskritization rather than in its potential of becoming a new symbol through which opposition to the British raj could be articulated.

The discussion of the final act of Jitu Santal, which was to barricade himself with his followers in a mosque when surrounded by the British police and to claim that the bullets of the British could not hurt his followers and him, is seen by Tanika Sarkar to have an irrational magical quality, for she says that this rested upon a belief in the magical transformation of the world. Broader political forces, she states further, were filtered through tribal logic and needs. Yet I wonder whether it is Jitu Santal or Tanika Sarkar here who shows better understanding of the broader political forces. In what way would Jitu have chosen a better death if he had handed himself to the British police and British justice which he profoundly distrusted? He would surely have ended up either as another Shikari, an approver on whose testimony others were hung, or proclaimed a traitor and given the kind of punishments described by Gautam Bhadra,<sup>19</sup> serving ultimately only as a demonstration to the world of the futility of rebellion and protest.

Indeed, nothing shows with greater clarity that punishments meted out by the British were not intended to show the power of the 'rule of law', but rather bore the marks of ritual deaths, than Bhadra's discussion of the lives of four rebels in 1857. One of these, the *maulavi*, a Muslim, was burnt and thus deprived of his body as the most important witness of his deeds in life on the day of judgement. A second was Shah Mal, whose head was carried on a spear for all to see the fate of rebels who defied British authority. In profound violation of the moral codes of their society, the bodies of the dead were not handed over to the relatives. Hence, if ritual death is what Jitu Santal chose, it was no different from the deaths prescribed by the British for the four rebels.

This leads us to the question of how to characterize and describe subaltern consciousness, the question directly addressed by Sumit

<sup>19</sup> Gautam Bhadra, 'Four rebels of Eighteen-Fifty-Seven', in Guha (1985), SS IV.

Sarkar.<sup>20</sup> He argues that there is a coexistence and complex interaction between different types of consciousness—e.g. caste, class, regional and national. Starting methodologically from Gramsci's position that the objective formation of subaltern social groups have their origin in pre-existing social groups whose mentalities, ideologies and aims they observe for a while, Sarkar goes on to define subaltern consciousness as having positive and negative dimensions. Examples of positive consciousness are participation in railway strikes, for instance, whereas to strike for cow protection is seen as evidence of negative consciousness. Yet, careful historian that he is, Sarkar also points out that there are recurring patterns that are similar in militant protests of this period, regardless of whether we are examining mass participation on a national issue, a regional issue, or a communalist or caste movement. It seems to me that in view of these similarities the distinction between positive and negative dimensions of subaltern consciousness is not very useful. First, it is important to recognize that the repertoire of collective action at any particular historical period is limited and groups can innovate only on the margins, as suggested by Tilly.<sup>21</sup> Second, it is not easy to characterize caste or ethnic consciousness as 'negative', as if it had an essence of its own, for it also depends on the interactional context within which this consciousness is being articulated. The cases described in all these volumes show that organizational patterns of caste may be used to articulate rebellion against the power of the state, or the justice of the caste or tribal *panchayat* to reject an illegitimate legality. Hence, it is the nature of the conflict within which a caste or tribe is locked which may provide the characteristics of that historical moment; to assume that we can know *a priori* the mentalities of castes or communities is to take an essentialist perspective which the evidence produced in the very volumes of *Subaltern Studies* would not support.

Most of the contributions in these volumes show the importance of charismatic leadership in subaltern rebellion, in the sense that the leaders are not bearers of either traditional or rational-legal authority in Weberian terms. Rather than characterize this as evidence of a mentality that places emphasis upon magical transformation, as

<sup>20</sup> Sumit Sarkar, 'The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-co-operation, c. 1905–22', in Guha (1984), SS III.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French: Four Centuries of Popular Struggle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

Sumit Sarkar suggests, it may be better to systematize the nature of charismatic leadership as well as the community that forms around a charismatic leader. Sarkar's work suggests that we can think of three moments in the emergence of a charismatic leader. First, there is his acceptance as an avatar, or a being with extraordinary power. Second, he is seen to confer an immunity to his followers. And third, there is a call for total transformation of the world. Sarkar discusses Gandhi as one such leader and traces his success to the fact that religious faith provides a built-in explanation for failure. This is disappointing, for it is not in the generality of religious faith but in the particularities of that moment that an understanding may be sought.

What we find in the case of charismatic leadership is the extraordinarily open character of the message. Amin's analysis of the rumours about Gandhi in Gorakhpur shows that there is a stitching together of motifs that places Gandhi in popular consciousness as both belonging to their world and yet being an outsider to it.<sup>22</sup> The destinat<sup>or</sup> of the communication is not a follower but a witness, whereas the destinat<sup>or</sup> is the one who does not believe or believes only partially in the divinity of Gandhi and is sought to be persuaded. Important though the study of the carriers of symbols is, it would be even more interesting to see the coherence, the objectified forms, and the nature of communication established in such volatile historical moments around the figure of the charismatic leader.

It is unfortunate that, while discussing such extraordinary historic moments, none of the contributors have examined the nature of the crowds which seemed to have been so important as an instrument of protest. Bhadra's essay does show that existing networks of relationships are important for understanding the organization of protest as well as the communication of messages.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Hardiman argues that violent protests by Bhils against moneylenders took place within a moral economy.<sup>24</sup> This view of crowds is strongly influenced by the work of E.P. Thompson. In the social science literature, however, we also have an opposite view of crowds as capricious, emotional and fickle. It is a pity that the nature of the crowds that are an instrument of protest is not taken up seriously by the contributors to these volumes. It would be very in-

<sup>22</sup> Shahid Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur district, Eastern UP, 1921-2' in Guha (1984) SS IV.

<sup>23</sup> Gautam Bhadra, see note 19.

<sup>24</sup> Hardiman, see note 14.

teresting to see what historical evidence has to suggest on these two opposite views of crowds.

### *Power and the body*

The dominance of the medical model in the exercise of modern forms of power has been established by the work of Foucault. We have a very sensitive description of this process in a paper by Arnold on the colonial modes of handling the epidemic of plague.<sup>25</sup> He shows how disease became a means of reorganizing the physical habitat, of assaulting the body, and violating private spaces—especially the home. Arnold is, however, not willing to see the objects on whom this power is exercised as passive beings. He shows how protest was organized around such imperatives as prescribing the modes of disposal of the dead, of removing patients from their families to hospitals, and especially against the seizure of women and their removal to hospitals. Protest cannot be seen as the expression of superstition against a scientific rationality, and the collage of rumours that he has examined for this period shows that in popular consciousness the British rulers were thought of as being contemptuous towards the sentiments, lives and bodies of the Indian subjects. This is a very important contribution for restoring the experiential content of such categories as superstition or rationality, around which such discussions often tend to be organized. It would, however, have been useful to examine the forms through which the medical model and the legal model come to be related in the exercise of colonial power. The Epidemic Diseases Act is mentioned, but its language is not analysed to show how human nature was sought to be constituted. Nor, indeed, is it shown how various categories were called into existence, and what model of imperatives was used. Arnold makes the fascinating suggestion that this opportunity was used to strike at the militancy of Tilak, and also to reorganize municipal councils. Thus the colonial context within which the medical model was used gave it a different tonality from the descriptions of Foucault. The relation between the objects on whom power is exercised and the historical moment in which such models get formulated will perhaps be analysed in greater detail in the future volumes of *Subaltern Studies*.

<sup>25</sup> David Arnold, 'Touching the Body: Perspectives on the Indian Plague', in Guha (1987), SS V.

The question of gender in the constitution of the subaltern has been largely absent from the purview of the studies mentioned here. An exception is Guha's paper on Chandra's death,<sup>26</sup> in which he analyses a historical document about a case of abortion in 1849. A widow developed a liaison with a man and became pregnant. The man disowned all responsibility and threatened the woman's mother that he would send the woman, Chandra, away to a Vaishnava *bhek*. The women of the family tried to arrange an abortion and Chandra died in the process. This story, by no means exceptional, becomes the medium through which the nature of women's subordination within the patriarchal structures of family, religion and law are examined, and Guha is able to create a remarkable narrative issue around the speech of the witnesses. Judicial discourse, as he says, is a reductive discourse which transforms the loving act of female relatives into crime, but does not have to take notice of the lover in the whole process of fixing responsibility for the crime. The speech in the judicial process is referential, but there is a rupture of the referential even in the referential mode. For instance, when the mother quotes the speech of the lover we do not hear even a remote memory of the sexual desire that might have given the relationship life. Guha's analysis of male dominance here is remarkable—the lover who takes the body of his beloved in passion, yet becomes the pronouncer of the law when there is a risk of social opprobrium. I would extend this even further and argue that it is not the case of the illegitimate lover alone but the entire structure of patriarchy within which sexual desire is articulated. The lover of the night (whether husband or adulterous lover) becomes the law giver of the morning, and in this lies the oppressive nature of heterosexual desire. I am not certain that I would agree with Guha that the woman's entry into a Vaishnava *bhek* would have simply substituted one form of dominance by another, for the material on female ascetics described by Obeyesekere would point to a different direction—asceticism as a means of transforming the oppressive demands of heterosexuality into the power to heal.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Guha, see note 13. However, there is an interesting analysis of this question as it occurs in a literary text by Gayatri Spivak in the same volume, which I am unable to consider here.

<sup>27</sup> See Gananath Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair* (Princeton University Press, 1984).

*The quotidian and the historic*

In these concluding comments I come back to the question I posed between the relationship of the anthropological and the historical. Guha raises the question of the relation between everyday life and the historic moment which needs to be conceptualized further. In this attempt it is necessary that the institution of time is conceptualized with some seriousness. Many contributors in the *Subaltern* volumes are content with the opposition between synchrony and diachrony, or between search for static laws and search for sequence and motion. These concepts of time end up spatializing time, hence have very limited relevance for an understanding of the socio-historical.

It seems necessary to state here that the relevance of the concept of synchrony for the anthropologist is not that it denies time, but rather that it allows the present to be constituted as a spectral present rather than a point present. It is not that sequences are not important for the anthropologist, but rather that these are absorbed within the concept of repetition. The construction of reality as intersubjective requires that the self must be seen as simultaneously the self and the non-self or the other. Hence simultaneity has been privileged over succession in the description of everyday life.

For the historian, on the other hand, it is the origin of novelty which is of far greater relevance. The most exciting descriptions in the volumes of *Subaltern Studies* show precisely the emergence of this novelty. The attempt to relate this to the everyday life of the subaltern, I hope, will be the next theoretical task of this group of scholars. Subalterns are not in my opinion morphological categories, but represent a perspective in the sense in which Nietzsche used this word. The development of this perspective, I hope, will also mean a new relationship with the chroniclers of the cultures under study. The kind of attempt that Pandey makes in relating colonial history to locally-produced histories will expand the possibilities of the writing of history in Indian society.<sup>28</sup> It is not that non-official sources are not abundant or not easily accessible, but rather that the legitimacy of those who are producing these materials needs to be recognized by official history.

<sup>28</sup> See Pandey, note 12.

# Glossary

<i>abwab</i>	Miscellaneous cesses, imposts and charges levied by <i>zamindars</i> (q.v.) and public officials in addition to rent and revenue.
<i>akhada</i>	Habitation and centres of worship of Vaisnava preachers.
<i>amlah</i>	Employees of a landlord's establishment.
<i>annaprasan</i>	Ritual to celebrate a child's first feed of rice.
<i>antaja</i>	Low caste.
<i>balak bhava</i>	Vaisnava devotion, modelled upon stories of Krishna's boyhood.
<i>badmash</i>	Bad character.
<i>bazaar</i>	Market.
<i>benami</i>	Land held under a false name.
<i>bhakti</i>	Attitude and activity of respectful devotion to God, as distinct from ritual activity ( <i>karma</i> ) or spiritual knowledge ( <i>jnana</i> ).
<i>chakri</i>	Job, usually in an office.
<i>charanamrita</i>	Lit. nectar from touching feet of holy man or social superior.
<i>chaukidar</i>	Watchman.
<i>chotolok</i>	Socially inferior people, as distinct from the <i>bhadralok</i> , in Bengal.
<i>dalan</i>	Wing of a house.
<i>daridnarayan</i>	Narayan embodied in the poor, a term used by Vivekananda to urge social service.
<i>dasatya</i>	Bondage, slavery.
<i>dehattva</i>	Knowledge (esp. expressed in songs) of the spiritual significance of the body.
<i>dewan</i>	Lit. head of a landlord's establishment; leader or principal adviser of a village.
<i>dhankarari</i>	Fixed produce-rent tenure.
<i>dharma</i>	The universal law or ethical norm.

<i>dharmpatri</i>	Religious notice or circular.
<i>dharna</i>	To sit in protest in order to enforce compliance of a demand (backed by the threat of religious demerit that the death of a protester will bring).
<i>dopadi</i>	A couplet.
<i>durwan</i>	Guard.
<i>dwija</i>	Twice-born; caste entitled to wear the sacred thread.
<i>ektara</i>	Single-stringed musical instrument.
<i>fakir</i>	Muslim mendicant.
<i>ganja</i>	Narcotic, usually smoked through a pipe, the <i>kalki</i> .
<i>goswami</i>	Vaisnava religious leader.
<i>guru</i>	Teacher who gives personal instruction to a disciple.
<i>hartal</i>	Closure of all business and work.
<i>hatayoga</i>	Branch of yoga specializing in methods of physical training, whose advanced forms are derived from the sexual-yogic and magical practices of Tantra.
<i>izaradar</i>	A revenue farmer.
<i>jati</i>	Endogamous caste groups.
<i>jatra</i>	Folk theatre form.
<i>kamini</i>	Woman as an object of sexual attraction.
<i>kanchan</i>	Gold; generally speaking wealth.
<i>kanoon</i>	Custom.
<i>kathak</i>	A professional narrator who reads or recites Puranic or other Hindu sacred texts for the edification of rural audiences.
<i>kathakatha</i>	Practice or vocation of a <i>kathak</i> (q.v.).
<i>khudkasht</i>	Resident cultivator.
<i>kirtan</i>	Vaisanava genre of devotional singing.
<i>kotwal</i>	Chief police officer.
<i>kulinism</i>	System supposedly established by king Ballal Sen (AD 1158–79) which marked out certain Brahmin and Kayastha lineages in Bengal as particularly prestigious.
<i>kuthkanidar</i>	Village underfarmer.
<i>lachari</i>	Verses composed in the Bengali language according to the three part rhythmic pattern.

<i>lathial</i>	Clubmen.
<i>lila</i>	The spontaneous play, unconstrained by need of interest, which motivates divine actions on earth.
<i>mahashay</i>	<i>Guru</i> (q.v.) of Kartabhaja sect.
<i>mahant</i>	Hindu religious leader, head of a temple or a sanyasi community.
<i>mandal</i>	Village headman.
<i>mangal kavya</i>	A genre of medieval Bengali ballads.
<i>mangan</i>	Lit. begging, used as euphemism for cesses or imposts levied by landlords on tenants.
<i>manib</i>	Master, employer.
<i>mantra</i>	Incantation, chant or scriptural verse.
<i>marfati</i>	Deviant Sufi orders whose beliefs and practices regarding the means of real communion with and knowledge ( <i>ma'rifa</i> ) of God cannot easily be reconciled with the <i>shariat</i> (q.v.)
<i>masjid</i>	Mosque.
<i>mathot</i>	Occasional cess or tax imposed on cultivators for some special purpose or under some incidental pretext by government officials or landlords.
<i>mela</i>	Fair.
<i>mleccha</i>	Of foreign race; a term often used by Hindu chauvinists in a pejorative sense to designate or describe Muslims.
<i>mohalla</i>	Locality in a city or <i>qasba</i> (q.v.).
<i>mufassil</i>	Countryside or district town, as distinct from metropolitan cities like Calcutta.
<i>murshid</i>	Teacher, instructor, esp. among Sufi orders.
<i>nafar</i>	Bonded servant.
<i>niranjan</i>	Another name for the deities Dharma and Siva in Bengal.
<i>nityavrindavan</i>	The infinite and eternal geographical representation of the abode of Krishna.
<i>palki</i>	Palanquin.
<i>panchali</i>	A traditional form of composition in verse in Bengali, meant to be sung.
<i>pandit</i>	Upper-caste learned man; teacher in traditional school.

<i>parda</i>	Veil.
<i>patua</i>	Caste of painters.
<i>pir</i>	A teacher of the Sufi way; a holy man.
<i>praja</i>	Subject, tenant.
<i>pranam</i>	Touching feet of social superior or the image of a deity, the standard ritual gesture of deference.
<i>purohit</i>	Brahmin priest.
<i>pyke</i>	A landlord's footman or armed retainer.
<i>qasba</i>	Small town.
<i>ryot</i>	Cultivator; subject.
<i>sadhana</i>	Devotion.
<i>sampraday</i>	(Here) the congregation of Gaudiya Vaisnavas.
<i>sankirtan</i>	Collective singing of <i>kirtan</i> (q.v.).
<i>shariat</i>	Sharia, the canon law of Islam.
<i>shashan</i>	Order, rule, discipline, (verb) to punish.
<i>sir</i>	Farm or land held by a dominant peasant or landlord directly in his own management at a reduced rate of rent or revenue.
<i>siropa</i>	Headgear conferred by landlord on tenant as reward for loyalty and service.
<i>smriti</i>	Memorized tradition of scripture; the corpus of ancient and medieval literature relating to Hindu law and tradition.
<i>talukdar</i>	Petty zamindars (in East Bengal).
<i>tamasha</i>	Comedy, farce.
<i>tarpan</i>	Offering (in this case) ritually to ancestors.
<i>tazia</i>	Replicas of the biers of Imams Hasan and Husain, the grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad, which are carried in procession during the Muharram observances.
<i>tol</i>	Centre of Brahminical learning.
<i>varna</i>	The classical division, derived from the Vedas, of society into four orders, namely Brahamana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra.
<i>vatsalya</i>	Form of Vaisnava devotion modelled on parental affection for children.
<i>yajna</i>	Vedic fire sacrifice.
<i>yuga</i>	Epoch, era.
<i>yuga-pralay</i>	Cataclysm ending an epoch.
<i>zamindar</i>	Landlord; landowner.

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